Table of Contents

1. Cats names & descriptions
2. 1.
3. 2.
4. 3.
5. 4.
6. 5.
7. 6.
8. 7.
9. 8.
10. 9.
11. 10.
12. 11.
13. 12.
14. 13.
15. 14.
16. 15.
17. 16.
18. 17.
19. 18.
20. 19.
21. 20.
22. 21.
23. 22.
24. 23.
25. 24.
26. 25.
27. 26.
28. 27.
29. 28.
30. 29.
31. 30.

Cats names & descriptions

[SHADOWCLAN] —

Leader: Badgerstar (Large brown tabby tom with yellow eyes)

Deputy: Redfang (Longhair ginger tabby tom with amber eyes)

Medicine Cat: Sunnypool (Golden tabby tom with unusually blue eyes)

Warriors (Toms and she-cats without kits):

Dawntuft (Black she-cat with amber eyes)

Poppystep (Pretty ginger she-cat with thick fur and blue eyes)

Stungface (Black tom with an orange face and yellow eyes)

Summerprowl (Light brown she-cat with yellow eyes)

Rabbitspring (Longhair cream-colored she-cat)

Springfoot (Tortoiseshell she-cat with one blue and one green eye)

Cloveryawn (Pure white she-cat with bright green eyes)

Frostflower (White she-cat with bright blue eyes, former rogue)

Mudstrike (Orange-y brown tabby tom with green eyes)

Apprentice: Mottledpaw

Berryfang (Ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes)

Apprentice: Flamepaw

Squidfur (Black tom with dark brown eyes)

Apprentice: Honeypaw

Autumnleaf (Dark brown tom with darker flecks and green eyes)

Amberface (Light brown she-cat with amber eyes)

Rainsight (Brown tabby tom with blue eyes)

Whiteflame (Flame-point siamese with pale blue eyes)

Rowanleaf (Dark brown tabby she-cat, former rogue)

Apprentices:

Honeypaw (Golden she-cat with green eyes)

Flamepaw (Ginger tom with amber eyes)

Mottledpaw (Mottled brown tom with yellow eyes)

Queens (She-cats expecting/nursing kits):

Beeflight (Pale ginger she-cat with brown stripes)

Elders:

Toadcroak (Mostly black tom with gray furs)

Flywhisker (Cream-colored she-cat who retired early due to going blind)

[RIVERCLAN] —

Leader: Beaverstar (Old, brown tabby tom with a bushy dark brown tail)

Deputy: Saffronpetal (Blue-gray she-cat with green eyes)

Medicine Cat: Thistleheart (White tom with blind eyes)

Apprentice: Otterpaw

Warriors (Toms and she-cats without kits):

Nettlethroat (Ginger tom with amber eyes)

Sandstripe (Pale ginger tom with blue eyes)

Rushblink (Light gray tabby she-cat with bright blue eyes)

Violetwing (Blue tabby she-cat with grey eyes)

Rustleheart (Gray tabby tom with blue eyes)

Willownose (White she-cat with light grey flecks)

Fernshine (Gray tabby she-cat with green eyes)

Apprentice: Cloudpaw

Tumblefoot (Golden tom with amber eyes)

Puddlefur (Black she-cat with green eyes)

Cheetahleg (Yellow she-cat with dark brown spots and long legs)

Cedarleaf (Light brown tom with darker flecks)

Apprentice: Sorrelpaw

Doveheart (White she-cat with yellow eyes)

Apprentice: Spottedpaw

Mossgrowl (Light brown tom with green eyes)

Geckonose (Tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes)

Apprentices:

Spottedpaw (Tortoiseshell tom with blue eyes)

Sorrelpaw (Light brown she-cat with blue eyes)

Cloudpaw (White tom with gray spots)

Otterpaw (Light brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes)

[THUNDERCLAN] —

Leader: Thrushstar (Brown tabby tom)

Deputy: Lionclaw (Golden tom with green eyes)

Medicine Cat: Brightwing (Pale ginger tabby she-cat)

Apprentice: Skypaw (White she-cat with blue eyes)

Warriors:

Ashtail (Gray she-cat)

Vinepool (Blue she-cat with green eyes)

Acornheart (Small brown tom with amber eyes)

Dunerunner (Brown tabby she-cat)

Stormpelt (Gray tom with black stripes)

Lynxbounce (Cream-colored tom with large ears)

Apprentice: Beetlepaw (white-and-gray tom)

Spottedfall (Tortoiseshell she-cat)

Boulderslide (Dark gray tabby tom)

Featherblink (Pale blue-gray she-cat)

Sunwhisker (Golden she-cat with a sun-shaped spot on her chest)

Moonleg (Blue she-cat with a moon-shaped spot on her leg)

Tangledfur (Calico she-cat with amber eyes)

Apprentice: Twigpaw (Small brown she-cat)

Flashwhisker (Ginger tom with blue eyes)

Apprentice: Beechpaw (Pale ginger she-cat)

Queens:

Petalberry (Blue-gray tabby she-cat)

Kits: Bluekit (Blue-gray she-kit) and Wolfkit (Gray tabby tom)

[WINDCLAN] —

Leader: Branchstar (Cream-colored tom with blue eyes)

Deputy: Pollengleam (Golden she-cat)

Medicine Cats: Morningfur (Ginger she-cat with green eyes)

Thornwhisker (Brown tabby tom)

Warriors:

Sheepcloud (White fluffy tom)

Sunbreeze (Ginger tom with pale blue eyes)

Charcoalbark (Dark gray tom with black flecks)

Brookfall (Brown tabby she-cat with blue eyes)

Moosewillow (Light brown she-cat)

Snaketail (White and black tom with green eyes)

Apprentice: Brackenpaw (Cream-colored tom)

Comfreybush (Cream-colored she-cat with green eyes)

Antdrift (Ginger tabby tom with amber eyes)

Weaseltuft (Light brown tabby tom)

Driftfoot (Grayish-blue tabby she-cat)

Horseflower (Brown tabby she-cat)

Foxblaze (Orange tabby tom)

Queens:

Coralclaw (Ginger she-cat with blue eyes)

Alderkit (White spotted tom with blue eyes), Rosekit (Ginger she-kit), and Gustkit (White spotted she-kit)

Elders:

Raspycloud (White she-cat with a raspy voice)

Hawkjaw (Dark brown tabby tom, half-blind)

1.

Geckonose buried her muzzle into the moss of her nest. Recently, she'd hardly been able to sleep. Every smell and movement of the forest made her twitch. She could smell and see everything from her nest to the other Clans. But finally, she drifted off to sleep.

Though she was woken up to the mixed smell of WindClan, ThunderClan, and ShadowClan. She opened her eyes, first seeing Whiteflame. And then two other cats who she didn't know— who were apprentices, by the look of it. They were each sleeping soundly, neither making a noise.

One was a white she-cat, her fur fluffy and soft-looking. The scent of herbs was all around her. And then the other, an undersized, thin, cream-colored tom who smelled of stale rabbit.

"Whiteflame, Geckonose." A voice came from behind them. Geckonose didn't recognize the golden-furred she-cat that stood there, but Whiteflame did. "Honeystar!" He purred, pressing his nose to hers gently. *Whiteflame told me about her!* Geckonose remembered, *She's the one who Badgerstar poisoned.*

"Hello, Whiteflame." Honeystar greeted him, but her soft eyes laid upon Geckonose. "I have come with a prophecy." She announced. Geckonose exchanged a glance with Whiteflame. "But there's already a prophecy!" She blurted.

Honeystar sighed. "Patience, young warrior." She murmured, sarcasm creeping into her mew. Geckonose's ears twitched, her paws shuffling in the moss as Honeystar's eyes bore into her. The golden ex-leader's pelt shimmered like sunlight on water, and when she finally spoke, her voice carried the weight of StarClan itself.

The words seemed to echo through the den, bouncing off the walls of Geckonose's mind until she could hardly breathe. She glanced at Whiteflame, her green eyes wide. "Two... that's us, isn't it?" she whispered.

Whiteflame's tail tip flicked uneasily, his blue eyes clouded with thought. "If it is, then we're not enough on our own. Four. StarClan says we'll need two more." His claws flexed against the moss, the truth of the prophecy burning in his chest.

Geckonose's mind whirled. "But who? Who could it be? The clans are already tearing themselves apart. Who would even trust us?"

Honeystar's gaze softened, but her tone sharpened like claws on stone. "Behind you is Skypaw and Brackenpaw. We've bestowed powers like yours upon to them." Honeystar meowed, the sun beginning to rise above him. "You two will need to find a way to speak to them." She began to fade away along with the stars in the sky.

Her form shimmered, fading into mist. As her starry light vanished, the den plunged back into silence. The warriors nearby stirred faintly in their sleep, unaware of the prophecy that had just been spoken.

The next night, while the full moon hung high above the RiverClan camp, and luckily, Geckonose had been chosen to go to the gathering. *Thank StarClan!* She thought, knowing that she had to meet Skypaw and Brackenpaw tonight.

The journey to Fourtrees seemed endless. The forest pressed close around them, silvered by moonlight, every rustle in the undergrowth making her fur prickle. Badgerstar strode ahead, his tail high, speaking low to the warriors at his side. Geckonose kept her gaze on the frosted ground, careful not to let her thoughts spill onto her face.

By the time they reached the great oaks, the other Clans had already gathered. Pelts of every color rippled under the moonlight, voices buzzing across the clearing. The air was thick with tension — WindClan and ThunderClan clustered together, their leaders speaking in low voices. ShadowClan's cats lounged near the roots of a tree.

Geckonose easily picked out Whiteflame's pelt from the crowd of dark-pelted ShadowClan cats, beckoning him over.

Geckonose padded slowly through the crowd, her ears pricked for Badgerstar's voice, her heart hammering in her throat. Every step toward Skypaw and Brackenpaw felt like walking across thin ice. When she finally slipped into the shadows beside the apprentices, two pairs of eyes fixed on her.

Skypaw's blue gaze widened in recognition. Her white fur glowed faintly under the moonlight, the herb-scent clinging to her pelt giving her away even more than her wide-eyed stare.

"Skypaw, Brackenpaw." Geckonose hissed as Whiteflame glanced around. "Come with us. We have important news to share."

"How do you—" Brackenpaw began, but Skypaw shut him up. "You're the cats from my dream!" She mewed, her eyes wide with awe. Geckonose nodded, bringing Skypaw and Brackenpaw away from the crowd. They stood behind a few huge roots, out of earshot from the other cats.

"We don't have much time," Geckonose whispered, her fur brushing theirs as she crouched low. "StarClan has chosen us. You — both of you — you're part of the prophecy." She whispered. Brackenpaw looked uncertain. "Are you sure? We're just apprentices." He murmured. "Me and Geckonose were just apprentices when we learned about the prophecy." Whiteflame explained, his blue gaze fixed on Skypaw. Any cat could see the resemblance.

She didn't seem to notice his gaze boring into her. "So what's my power?" She asked curiously, her eyes wide with curiosity. "We don't know yet... StarClan won't tell us everything." Whiteflame glanced away. "So we have to figure it out?" Brackenpaw asked, while Skypaw murmured something in annoyance.

"Of course we have to find it out, rabbit-brain!" Skypaw swiped him over the ears, her insult towards WindClan as obvious as a fox stomping around in the moor.

Brackenpaw ducked from her swipe, his ears hot. "Alright, alright! You don't have to claw my fur off."

Geckonose pressed her tail across both their shoulders, silencing

them. Her gaze darted back toward the clearing, where the leaders' pelts gleamed atop the Great Rock. "Quiet. If any cat hears us, this will all be for nothing."

Whiteflame leaned closer, his voice low and edged with tension. "Honeystar told us the truth — two must become four. That means all of us. Together." His gaze lingered on Skypaw, but his words carried to them all. "If we can't find a way to use what StarClan has given us, Badgerstar will tear the Clans apart."

2.

Brackenpaw and Snaketail stood in the training hollow. "Now, we won't always be battling in the moor, like for example, if we were fighting in RiverClan territory, cats would be hiding everywhere in the reeds." Snaketail explained before walking over to a bush. "If you didn't know I was here, I could easily ambush you if there were other bushes around."

Snaketail's eyes gleamed with the kind of patience that only comes from many moons of hunting and fighting. He crouched low, tail tucked, and moved toward the bush in a smooth, silent ripple. Brackenpaw watched him, every muscle coiled, trying to learn the way his mentor made himself part of the ground.

"See how I keep my belly low?" Snaketail whispered, tilting his head so his whiskers brushed the leaves. "Don't twitch. Breathe slow. Let your paws fall like falling leaves — no sound, no snap. You don't give yourself away with noise or a wrong shadow."

Brackenpaw swallowed, then flattened himself against the hollow's bank. He felt foolish at first — his paws felt too big and clumsy— but he copied Snaketail anyway, forcing his breath to even out, tamping down the urge to scratch at a stray twig. He inched forward, every step measured, until the bush hid him completely.

Snaketail froze, then gave the tiniest of signals: a tilt of his ear, a barely-there flick of his tail. Brackenpaw pounced from the bush like a spring snapping, claws out, teeth bared — and found only empty air. Snaketail rolled to his paws, laughing softly.

"Not bad," Snaketail purred, brushing his flank against Brackenpaw's shoulder in what passed for a smile. "But you led with your eyes. A good ambush smells where the prey will go, hears where they step. Close your jaw, listen with everything you are. Then strike."

Brackenpaw's cheeks burned with the sting of being told his mistake, but the praise warmed him. He set himself again, this time

letting the forest fill him: the soft rasp of grass, the scent of musty earth, the faint rattle of a beetle under a leaf. When Snaketail slipped by, Brackenpaw sprang, and this time he landed true, pinning his mentor's tail between his paws.

Snaketail yelped theatrically, then bowed his head in mock surrender. "There. That's more like it!" He pressed his nose to Brackenpaw's. "You're a quick learner, you know. Now let's try dodging."

Without warning, Snaketail backed up a bit and then charged forwards. On instinct, Brackenpaw jumped back onto his hind legs. Snaketail yowled in surprise, skidding against the ground. Brackenpaw's front paws crashed down on his mentor's back just before he could roll away. He grunted before managing to his paws, flinging Brackenpaw off of him. Brackenpaw hardly staggered before regaining his balance. Snaketail lunged forwards, but Brackenpaw swiftly dodged and landed what would be a harsh blow if it were a real battle.

Snaketail panted, his paws shaky as he stood up again. "You're doing very well, Brackenpaw. It's just a matter of time before Branchstar makes you a warrior." He rasped, then beckoned with his tail for Brackenpaw to follow him back to camp.

A warrior. Brackenpaw thought as he followed Snaketail back to camp. The words echoed in his head. He could hardly believe it! *A warrior!*

"A warrior!" Brackenpaw exclaimed, while Foxblaze listened. Foxblaze was his older brother, from Sunbreeze and Moosewillow's first litter. Since there were no other apprentices, Brackenpaw usually talked to Foxblaze and Horseflower.

Foxblaze chuckled, his whiskers twitching with amusement. "You're sounding more like one every day," he teased, swatting Brackenpaw lightly on the ear with his tail. "But don't let it go to your head just yet. Branchstar's not going to make you a warrior until he knows you can handle yourself *and* your clanmates."

Brackenpaw puffed out his chest. "Snaketail said I was doing really

well! I pinned him twice!" He sounded proud, eyes bright as stars. "He said it's just a matter of time before I become a warrior."

Foxblaze's gaze softened, though his grin didn't fade. "Snaketail doesn't hand out praise lightly. If he said that, he meant it. But remember — being a warrior isn't just about fighting. It's about knowing when not to fight, too."

Brackenpaw tilted his head, fur still bristling with excitement. "But what if the other Clans attack? What if ShadowClan tries something?"

Foxblaze's tail-tip flicked, his amber eyes darkening. "Then you'll fight with honor. But don't waste your claws on pride or anger. Warriors like that don't last long." Foxblaze sighed, as if he were thinking of somecat. For a moment, the camp around them felt quieter — the rustle of reeds, the chatter of sparrows above, the soft bubbling of the nearby stream. Foxblaze leaned closer, lowering his voice. "You're a good cat, Brackenpaw. Don't let this war change that."

Brackenpaw blinked, confused by his brother's sudden seriousness. "War? Do you mean Badgerstar's little fight..?"

Foxblaze hesitated, glancing around the camp as if to make sure no cat was listening. "There's talk. ShadowClan's restless again. Badgerstar's making moves near the borders, and Branchstar's been holding late meetings with the senior warriors. Just... keep your ears open, alright? Things might get worse before they get better."

Brackenpaw's heart thudded. "If it comes to battle, I'll protect WindClan," he vowed, his tail lifting high. Foxblaze smiled faintly, pressing his muzzle to his brother's head. "I know you will. Just promise me you'll be careful. You've got too much of Sunbreeze's fire in you— and none of Moosewillow's patience."

Brackenpaw purred softly at that, though his mind still raced with thoughts of war, loyalty, and the promise of becoming a warrior. As he watched the sun dip low beyond the moor, he whispered to himself, "I'll make them proud. I'll make *WindClan* proud."

3.

Skypaw couldn't stop thinking about the prophecy. *I have powers!* She needed to know what they were! Beechpaw and Beetlepaw, two of her littermates bounded into the medicine den to *visit* their sister. Brightwing was out collecting herbs, or whatever she could find in the frost. The only other cat was Ashtail, who was asleep and sick with greencough.

"Look at the squirrel I caught!" Beechpaw meowed loudly, holding up the fat squirrel she'd caught. Skypaw put her tail over her mouth. "Shush! You're going to wake Ashtail up, and she'll be angrier than a fox in a fit!" Her mew was hushed.

Silence fell over the den until a loud yowl came from the nursery. "Brightwing! Skypaw!" Petalberry yowled across the camp. Ashtail shot up in her nest as Skypaw scrambled to the nursery. Wolfkit laid on the floor, his little breaths raspy as he coughed. "Help him!" Petalberry wailed. Skypaw picked up Wolfkit and rushed him into the medicine den, racking her brain for all the herbs she could need.

Wolfkit coughed up some green stuff, the same stuff Ashtail had been coughing up the other day. *Greencough!* Skypaw remembered, *He needs catmint!*

Grabbing what she thought was catmint, she chewed it up for the small kit and helped him swallow it. Though the coughing lessened, his breaths still came in raspy gasps. *Juniper berries help breathing.* Skypaw hoped she was right. She grabbed some berries from the herb stock and fed them to Wolfkit, who swallowed them without a complaint.

Skypaw suddenly realized that Beetlepaw was watching her with wide eyes. "Wow! Will all those leaves and berries really help him?" He asked curiously. "They're not just leaves!" Skypaw's pelt bristled.

Beechpaw joined Beetlepaw's side, watching Wolfkit as he curled up

next to Ashtail. The old she-cat hardly noticed, closing her eyes and falling asleep again.

"At least *we* can hunt. We know if we're helping or not." Her gaze lifted to Skypaw, whose blue eyes met hers. "We have better things to do than hang around the medicine den. Besides, it smells weird in here. Let's go." Beechpaw growled before turning around and leaving. Beetlepaw followed, casting one last glance at Skypaw.

For the first time, Skypaw wondered if she made the right choice to be a medicine cat. *If I was a warrior, I could hunt with Beechpaw, Beetlepaw, and Twigpaw.* She felt a sharp pang of sadness.

Why couldn't they see that she was special? *StarClan doesn't tell regular cats about prophecies.* She thought. But still, she wished that she could hunt mice and explore the forest with her littermates. Maybe then they'd be closer.

But Flashwhisker's coughing broke through her thoughts. He refused to come to the medicine den, and had already gotten the other stubborn warriors sick. Another cough— but this time it wasn't Flashwhisker. Skypaw sighed, padding towards the sound. She saw Twigpaw, her third littermate, curled and shrunken in her nest while she coughed.

"Twigpaw!" Skypaw gasped, nudging her sister out of her nest. "Come on, let's get you some tansy. That cough should ease."

Twigpaw looked like she wanted to complain, but her jaws were clamped shut until she had another coughing fit. Skypaw gave her some tansy, but she quickly turned her head away. "Just eat it!" Skypaw urged. Twigpaw grumbled something before finally eating the herbs.

"Yuck...!" She muttered, wrinkling her nose between mouthfuls. "Just eat them, furball. Your ceremony will be any day now, and you don't wanna be sick while Beetlepaw and Beechpaw become warriors, do you?" Skypaw asked, and Twigpaw shook her head. "Thanks, Skypaw. I feel better already!" Twigpaw bounced in place, and Skypaw could tell she wanted to go hunting as soon as she could.

"Go and rest." She advised, while Brightwing finally returned with a mouthful of herbs. While she sorted them, she eyed Skypaw. "What happened while I was gone?" She asked, separating chervil from watermint and borage from goldenrod.

"Wolfkit's caught greencough, and I think Flashwhisker has whitecough. Twigpaw was coughing too so I gave her some tansy and—" Skypaw was cut off by Bluekit's little mew as she bounded through the den enterance. "Petalberry says Skypaw saved Wolfkit's life!"

Brightwing's ears perked up. "She did what?" Bluekit bounced on her tiny paws. "She saved him! Petalberry said Wolfkit couldn't breathe, but then Skypaw gave him some herbs and now he's sleeping!"

Brightwing turned to Skypaw, her expression unreadable. For a heartbeat, Skypaw's heart thudded with fear — had she done something wrong? Then Brightwing's whiskers twitched in a small, approving smile. "What herbs did you give him?"

One of Brightwing's quizzes. They always made Skypaw feel nervous and forget all of her herbs. "Catmint and juniper berries..." She muttered, her pelt prickling with anxiety.

"You acted fast," Brightwing murmured. "And wisely. Catmint and juniper berries were the right choices for a kit with greencough."

Skypaw's chest swelled with pride. "I—I just remembered what you told me," she said, but deep down, she knew it was more than that. The knowledge had come to her like instinct, like a whisper from StarClan itself.

Brightwing padded to Wolfkit's side, brushing her muzzle over his flank. The tiny tom's breathing was slow, steady— not perfect, but no longer gasping. "He'll make it," Brightwing confirmed, looking back at Skypaw. "You did well."

Bluekit purred, tail high. "I told you she's amazing! I bet StarClan helped her!"

The words made Skypaw's fur prickle. *StarClan...* The prophecy echoed in her mind. *Two must become four; only then shall the battle be won.* What if this was her gift — the power to heal beyond normal medicine cats?

But before she could dwell on it, a cough rumbled from the corner of the den. Ashtail shuddered in her sleep, her chest heaving. Brightwing hurried over, sniffing her breath, and frowned. "She's worse. We're nearly out of catmint— I'll have to go to the Twolegplace tomorrow to find more."

"I can go," Skypaw blurted. "I know where the patch grows." She lifted her tail and tilted her head hopefully. "No, you've worked hard today. You deserve rest."

Skypaw dipped her head, though her paws itched to argue. As Brightwing turned back to sorting herbs, Skypaw felt a tingle beneath her fur — that same strange, humming energy that she'd felt when treating Wolfkit. Her gaze flicked toward Ashtail, who groaned in her sleep.

Skypaw crept closer, her breath shallow. "Please," she whispered, brushing her paw against Ashtail's flank. "StarClan, help her."

Her paw felt warm — almost too warm — and for a heartbeat, light seemed to pulse faintly from her pads. She jerked back, blinking hard. The glow vanished, leaving only the soft sound of breathing. But when she looked again...

Ashtail's breathing had steadied. Skypaw froze. *Did I just—?* The den was silent, the herbs rustling softly in the cold breeze. Bluekit peeked back inside, eyes wide. "Skypaw? Is Ashtail okay now?"

Skypaw didn't answer right away. Her heart pounded as she looked at her paw, still tingling.
"I... I think she will be," she murmured.

But inside, a thrill of fear and awe coursed through her. Whatever power StarClan had given her — she'd just used it.

4.

Whiteflame carefully stalked a vole. It was fat for the middle of leaf-bare, but then again, it was nearly newleaf. As soon as he lunged, somecat else must've had the same idea. His nose smashed against Rowanleaf's and he tumbled with the she-cat.

"I was stalking that vole mouse-br—" Rowanleaf paused when she looked up at Whiteflame. He could see the way her fur bristled and she shifted her paws. It didn't take StarClan to know that she liked him. But Whiteflame loved Geckonose, even if they weren't supposed to be mates. Clan boundaries would never stop him from being her mate.

"Well I was stalking it too." Whiteflame growled before stalking away. Rowanleaf's tail flicked in irritation, but she didn't call after him. Whiteflame could feel her gaze burning into his pelt as he stalked off toward the trees. The vole was long gone now, the sound of its scurrying fading into the frost-stiff grass. He lashed his tail once. *Fox-dung.*

The forest was quiet except for the sighing of the wind through bare branches. Snow crunched beneath his paws, sharp and dry. He tried to focus on hunting again, but his mind kept circling back to Geckonose — her soft voice, the calm steadiness in her green eyes when everything around him felt like it was splitting apart.

I'll see her at the Gathering, he told himself. The thought brought warmth to his chest, even as the chill of the wind bit through his fur.

"Whiteflame!" Rowanleaf's voice called behind him, hesitant this time. He turned, whiskers twitching in annoyance. "What?"

The she-cat shifted awkwardly on her paws. "I—uh—sorry for snapping. I just thought... maybe we could hunt together?"

Whiteflame hesitated. A part of him wanted to say yes — not

because he liked her, but because it was easier to hide his thoughts when he wasn't alone with them. But another part of him recoiled. Spending time with Rowanleaf would only make things harder for her once the truth came out.

He shook his head. "I've got patrol duty after this. Maybe another time."

Rowanleaf's ears flattened. "Oh. Right." She turned away, tail drooping.

Whiteflame watched her go, guilt tugging at his belly. She didn't deserve his coldness. But neither did Geckonose deserve for him to lead another she-cat on. With a sigh, he padded toward the riverbank, staring down at the thin sheet of ice that clung to its edge. His reflection wavered — fire-colored fur and icy-blue eyes staring back at him.

Two must become four... The prophecy echoed in his head again, twisting his stomach.

He flexed his claws into the snow. "StarClan, why can't anything ever be simple?" he muttered. The wind carried no answer. Only the faint rustle of reeds— and the scent of RiverClan.
Whiteflame's heart skipped. Geckonose. He lifted his head, scanning the shadows, hope flaring in his chest.

He slipped out of ShadowClan territory, finding the Twoleg nest and hiding beneath it. He closed his eyes, searching for Geckonose's scent, but he couldn't find it. Sighing with disappointment, Whiteflame turned to leave. As he crossed back over the border, Rowanleaf sprung out of the bushes.

"What were you doing underneath the abandoned Twolegplace?" She demanded, her eyes narrowing in suspicion. "I was stalking a prey-scent." Whiteflame lied smoothly.

"Then why haven't you caught anything?"

"It crossed over the RiverClan border. Why are you so suspicious of me?" Whiteflame questioned her back, but he knew exactly why. *It's*

because I don't feel the same. He thought, his blue eyes narrowing.

Rowanleaf's tail lashed, sending snow flying. "Because you've been acting strange lately," she hissed. "You're gone half the time, and when you are around, you barely talk to any of us unless it's Amberface or Rainsight. You think I don't notice when you slip out after dark?"

Whiteflame's fur bristled, his heart thudding. "I've been hunting for the Clan. Maybe if you focused more on your own duties, you'd see that."

Her ears flattened, and hurt flickered in her amber eyes. "I'm only worried about you, Whiteflame." Her voice softened, but there was an edge beneath it. "You've changed since the last Gathering."

He turned his head away, forcing his fur flat. "Maybe I'm just tired. We all are."

But Rowanleaf stepped closer, her breath misting in the cold air. "Don't lie to me." Her voice was quiet now, almost pleading. "If something's wrong... you can tell me. I won't tell Badgerstar."

At the mention of his father's name, Whiteflame's stomach twisted. He met her gaze for a heartbeat, seeing the genuine concern buried under her suspicion. For a moment, he almost wished he could tell her everything — about Geckonose, about the prophecy, about the war that was coming. But he couldn't. "I'm fine," he said flatly. "Just leave it, Rowanleaf."

Her tail drooped, but she didn't move away. "You don't have to push every cat away, you know," she murmured. "One day, you'll look around and realize no one's left."

Whiteflame's throat tightened, but he didn't respond. Instead, he brushed past her, his pelt brushing hers for only a heartbeat— long enough to feel her shiver.

"Go back to camp," he muttered, his voice low. "You'll catch a chill out here."

He didn't look back as he padded toward the shadows of the pine

forest, though he could feel Rowanleaf's eyes following him until the darkness swallowed him whole.

When he finally reached the cover of the trees, he stopped, exhaling shakily. The cold night pressed close around him, but his thoughts were already across the river.

Where are you, Geckonose?

5.

"There's been rogue-scent on our territory." Violetwing hissed to Saffronpetal, quiet so that she wouldn't alert her clanmates. Beaverstar's ear twitched before he walked over. "Rogues?" He inquired, his deep blue gaze falling on Violetwing.

"Yes, we tried to follow their trail but they crossed over the river." She continued, "But they had ShadowClan scent on them." That part made Geckonose's fur stand on edge. *What if Whiteflame's in danger?* She anxiously sunk her claws into the snowy ground.

Beaverstar didn't seem to notice. "Badgerstar has already caused enough unrest within the forest. I will have a word with him soon." As he spoke, Puddlefur shifted anxiously next to Geckonose. She'd almost forgotten that Puddlefur was one of *them*. The she-cat was incredibly kind, it was hard to believe that she was apart of Badgerstar's warriors.

Beaverstar's tail-tip flicked, spraying snow across the camp entrance. "If ShadowClan cats are consorting with rogues, I'll see to it that Badgerstar gives me an explanation," he growled, his voice low but edged with fury. Saffronpetal dipped her head. "Do you think they're working together?"

Beaverstar didn't answer right away. His gaze swept over the camp — his warriors sharing uneasy murmurs, tails twitching, fur fluffed against the cold. "If they are," he said finally, "then ShadowClan isn't just a threat to themselves anymore. They're a danger to us all."

Geckonose's heart thudded painfully. *ShadowClan scent...* What if Whiteflame had been the one near the rogues? Had he been caught helping them? Or worse— had Badgerstar found out about him sneaking beyond the border? *No. What would rogues have to do with that?*

"Geckonose?" Puddlefur's quiet mew snapped her back. "You're digging holes in the snow."

Geckonose blinked, realizing her claws had scraped the ground raw beneath her paws. "I—sorry." She tried to shake the frost from her fur, but the cold had already sunk deep into her pelt.

Beaverstar turned to the gathered cats. "Saffronpetal— double the patrols near the river. I don't want rogues, or ShadowClan, anywhere near our camp. And if you scent them again, send for me immediately."

"Yes, Beaverstar," Saffronpetal replied, dipping her head. As the patrols dispersed, Geckonose hesitated. She wanted to follow Puddlefur, to beg her to leave Badgerstar's side, but Beaverstar's sharp eyes swept across the camp. She couldn't risk being seen conspiring now.

Hold on, Whiteflame, she thought, glancing toward the river, where faint mist curled like fog over the ice. *Whatever's happening, don't do anything reckless.* She silently begged her mate, but she knew he couldn't hear her.

"Hey, Geckonose!" Doveheart called for her friend. Geckonose looked over to the white she-cat, who almost blended in with the snow. "What's up?" She purred.

Doveheart looked around, then with a flick of her tail-tip, gestured for Geckonose to follow her. "Let's go out on a walk." She offered politely. Geckonose tilted her head, but didn't question Doveheart. "Lead the way." She meowed, her whiskers twitching in anticipation.

Doveheart lead her over to the river, where she sat on the bank. It was mostly frozen over, aside from a few holes in the ice. The older she-cat lifted her muzzle, sniffing the air softly. "The ice is starting to melt." She pointed out calmly, her yellow eyes bright— shining with something Geckonose had never seen before. She sniffed the air too. Doveheart was right— newleaf was finally coming.

"Prey and herbs will be plentiful. It's a perfect time for any she-cat to have kits." Doveheart purred. Geckonose's whiskers twitched again. "What are you talking about?" She asked, but she wasn't a fool— she had an idea of what was going on.

"I suppose I should just tell you." Doveheart muttered, her fur bristling with embarrassment. "I'm having Cedarleaf's kits, Geckonose!"

Geckonose blinked in surprise, her tail tip flicking. "Cedarleaf's—? Doveheart, that's wonderful!" she purred, pressing her nose to her friend's shoulder.

Doveheart's fur fluffed in shy delight. "You think so? I was worried you'd say it was a bad time. With all the trouble between the Clans..."

Geckonose shook her head. "StarClan knows we could use some good news right now. Kits are always a blessing." She soothed.

Doveheart purred softly, her eyes drifting over the ice. "Cedarleaf doesn't even know yet. I want to tell him tonight, when the moon's up. It feels like a new beginning, doesn't it?"

Geckonose smiled, but her chest ached faintly. A new beginning... She wished things could be that simple for her and Whiteflame. The thought of raising kits safely in RiverClan— without fear, without secrets— seemed like something from a dream.

"Geckonose?" Doveheart tilted her head. "You've gone all quiet." Worry pooled in Doveheart's eyes. "Oh—sorry," Geckonose mewed quickly. "I'm just happy for you. Really."

The two she-cats sat in silence for a few moments, the river whispering beneath its ice. Above them, the sun glowed weakly through thin clouds, hinting at the promise of newleaf warmth.

Doveheart stretched, her breath misting. "Come on. Let's bring back some prey before Beaverstar starts wondering where we've gone."

Geckonose nodded, standing and brushing snow from her pelt. As they started back through the reeds, she glanced once more at the river— at the far shore, where ShadowClan's forest rose dark and still.

One day, I want to have his kits. Geckonose sighed as she turned away. *But I would have to keep that secret. Doveheart is luckier than*

she knows.

6.

The moon shone brightly over the moor, while Brackenpaw slept in the apprentices den. Sometimes it was nice having a den all to himself— and sometimes it was lonely. Every now and again, Foxblaze and Horseflower would sleep there too, but it wasn't as often anymore.

Brackenpaw stirred in his sleep, the faint sound of pawsteps slowly waking him up. Usually he would've rolled over and gone back to sleep, but there were too many cats for them to just be heading to the Dirtplace. He opened his eyes to see a group of his clanmates. Branchstar, Weaseltuft, Brookfall, and Sunbreeze. *Sunbreeze?*

He knew it wasn't his place, but he got out of his nest to follow them. *My father is with them. I have to go.* He thought.

Slowly and quietly, Brackenpaw snuck behind them, hiding in every bush he could. Then he scented it— *ShadowClan!* He recognized the scent from the gathering. But there was another scent that smelled like crow-food and no clan in particular.

Badgerstar and some cats Brackenpaw had never seen before emerged from the other side of the border. "These are my newest recruits." He meowed, gesturing to the strange cats behind him. "Is that what you're calling us now?" A dark gray she-cat whose fur stuck out in all directions pressed her flank against his. A purr rumbled deep in his throat, a sound no cat thought the fox-hearted leader could make.

"Who are these cats?" Branchstar asked, looking them over. It was easy to tell that they weren't from any clan. "This right here is Saturn." He gestured to the she-cat at his side. *Saturn? What kind of a name is that?* "They're rogues!" Brookfall blurted. Badgerstar's tail flicked, silencing the now-growling rogues.

"Not anymore." He said calmly. "They'll be apart of ShadowClan by moonhigh tomorrow."

Weaseltuft bared his fangs, looking over the rogues. "Doesn't that just give ShadowClan more warriors?" He growled, "That isn't fair!" Branchstar gave Weaseltuft a glare to shut him up.

Badgerstar's whiskers simply twitched in response. A different rogue stepped up this time, a dark golden-brown tom with scars all over his body. "This is Scar. Since WindClan is my greatest ally, he'll be staying with you. He's as loyal as any warrior." Badgerstar meowed, looking proud of himself— as if he were the most generous cat in the forest.

Scar dipped his head stiffly. "You won't regret it," he rasped, his voice as rough as gravel. His yellow eyes gleamed in the moonlight — too sharp, too cold. Brackenpaw felt his fur prickle. Everything about the tom screamed danger. Even Weaseltuft seemed uneasy now, his tail flicking nervously behind him.

Branchstar gave a curt nod. "Fine. But he'll follow WindClan's rules while he's on our territory. If he doesn't— he's gone."

Badgerstar's tail twitched in amusement. "Of course," he said silkily. "I'm sure Scar will behave."

Scar's mouth curled into something that might've been a smile. "I'll be on my best behavior."

The words didn't make Brackenpaw feel any better. "Come, WindClan," Branchstar said finally, his tone clipped. "We've heard enough for one night."

As his father turned to leave, Brackenpaw pressed himself lower in the shadows, heart pounding. He waited until their pawsteps faded before daring to move again.

What was Badgerstar *doing*? Rogues in ShadowClan— and now one in *WindClan*? The forest already felt stretched thin with tension; this would only make it worse.

He slipped back toward camp, paws light as feathers. The chill of the night air stung his nose, but it wasn't what made his fur bristle. When he reached the edge of the apprentice's den again, he

hesitated. He wanted to tell someone— anyone— but who would believe him?

He curled into his nest, staring at the den wall. *If Scar's going to stay with us,* he thought grimly, *I'll make sure I find out what he's really doing here.*

But Brackenpaw already knew what was going on. The war— these were just more warriors for it. Badgerstar wanted as many paws as he could get— *and apparently, rogues count too.*

The next morning, Branchstar called a clan meeting, Scar standing below the tallrock. "We have a new Clanmate." Branchstar explained, watching as a few paws shifted. "WindClan is strong, of course, but ShadowClan has been causing tensions for far too long. This is Scar, and he will stay with WindClan from now on." *Liar.*

Branchstar is a liar. Brackenpaw couldn't believe it. "But he's a rogue!" Somecat hissed, but Branchstar silenced them with a flick of his tail. "Not anymore." He growled, repeating Badgerstar's words— his lies.

"From this moment forward, Scar will be known as Scarstrike. WindClan will accept him as a Clanmate, and I wish that our ancestors will look down upon this warrior." Branchstar smiled down at Scarstrike. He seemed to like his new name— but only a few warriors cheered. Brackenpaw wasn't one of them.

When the meeting ended, cats began to disperse— some muttering under their breath, others pretending everything was normal. Brackenpaw stayed near the back of the crowd, his eyes fixed on Scarstrike.

The new warrior stood tall beside Branchstar, his tail swaying lazily as if he owned the place already. His eyes flicked across the clearing, landing briefly on Brackenpaw. A chill ran down the apprentice's spine.

He knows I was there.

"Don't stare, mouse-brain." Horseflower's whisper snapped him out

of it. She nudged his shoulder as she passed. "You'll just make him look at you more."

Brackenpaw swallowed hard, glancing down at his paws. "He's not a real warrior," he muttered.

Foxblaze, lounging beside the fresh-kill pile, flicked an ear. "Doesn't matter. Branchstar says he is, so he is." His tone was flat, unreadable. "But—"

Foxblaze met his gaze. "Watch your tongue, Brackenpaw. You don't want to sound like you're questioning the leader."

Brackenpaw fell silent. Around him, the camp seemed too quiet, the air thick with unspoken fear. Even the wind that brushed through the gorse felt colder.

Scarstrike padded past, the faint scent of blood and crowfood clinging to his fur. He dipped his head mockingly toward Brackenpaw as he passed.

"See you around, little one," he rasped, his eyes glinting with amusement. Brackenpaw's claws sank into the dirt. He didn't care what Branchstar said— this wasn't right.

Something was happening in the forest, and WindClan was walking straight into it.

7.

Rain poured down onto the small patch of thyme that Skypaw was collecting, drenching both the leaves and her fur. *I wonder how RiverClan cats deal with this!* She thought, trying to shake the water out of her fur, but more of it soaked in. "At least rain means newleaf is coming." Moonleg meowed from behind her, carrying dock leaves in her jaws.

"I guess." Skypaw muttered. She had to have a warrior escort her to gather herbs. Ever since ThunderClan smelled rogues on its territory, no cat was allowed out of camp by themselves. With so much sickness in the clans, everycat was vulnerable.

Moonleg set down her dock leaves and sniffed the air, her ears twitching. "We should head back soon," she murmured. "The rain will wash away our scents, but it'll do the same for rogues."

Skypaw nodded, tucking the thyme carefully into the bundle she'd made from a wide burdock leaf. "I just need a bit more. Brightwing said we were almost out."

Before Moonleg could reply, a sharp crack echoed through the forest— a branch snapping nearby. Both cats froze, pelts bristling. The rain masked most sounds, but that had been close. "Moonleg...?" Skypaw whispered.

The warrior's tail flicked for silence. She crouched low, scanning the ferns ahead. A moment later, a faint movement— a dark shape slipping between the wet bracken.

"Who's there?" Moonleg hissed, stepping forward. The bushes rustled again. Skypaw's heart pounded. She could scent something faintly— not ThunderClan, not WindClan either. The smell was sharp and bitter, like crowfood mixed with rain.

"Stay behind me," Moonleg ordered. Then, just as quickly as it appeared, the shape vanished into the rain. Only the dripping of

water remained.

Moonleg's eyes narrowed. "We're leaving. Now." She ordered, blue fur bristled. Skypaw didn't argue. She grabbed the herbs and hurried after the warrior, glancing back only once.

For a heartbeat, she thought she saw a pair of eyes watching her from the shadows— pale and cold as the moonlight through the clouds.

The two she-cats raced back to camp, bursting through the entrance. Skypaw brought the herbs back to the medicine den while Moonleg told Thrushstar what had happened. "Lionclaw, send out a patrol!" He ordered his deputy.

Just a few moments later, Lionclaw, Moonleg, Acornheart, Featherblink, and Tangledfur were heading out— Moonleg in the lead.

"Concentrate on sorting those herbs, Skypaw." Brightwing scolded from the other side of the den, while Ashtail wheezed. Brightwing grabbed a ball of moss and soaked it in water before giving it to the sick she-cat. Ashtail gave a grunt of appreciation before lapping the water from it.

"I never thought my last days as a warrior would be spent in a medicine den." She grumbled. Brightwing's fur bristled. "Don't be silly, Ashtail. You're growing better everyday." She promised, but the senior warrior only shook her head. "I know I'm going to live, mouse-brain." Ashtail hissed. *Are warriors supposed to call their medicine cat a mouse-brain?* Skypaw asked herself sarcastically, but she knew better than to speak to her elders like that.

Brightwing just tilted her head. "I'm retiring soon." Ashtail finally explained, coughing into her paw. "I'm aging day by day, you know. No warrior can live forever. It is my time to retire." She rasped.

"You should be out hunting right now." Skypaw spoke up again, her ears pinning with sympathy. No warrior would want to spend their last days before retirement sick in the medicine den, bound to their nest. "It's fine, Skypaw. I have hunted for plenty of seasons." Ashtail

meowed, her tail drawing over Skypaw's back.

Before Skypaw could reply, Brightwing's ears flicked. Voices echoed outside — the sound of hurried pawsteps through the gorse tunnel. Skypaw's heart jumped. *The patrol's back already?*

Moonleg burst into the den, her fur slicked dark with rain. "Thrushstar needs you, Brightwing," she panted. "Tangledfur's hurt — something attacked us!"

Skypaw froze, her tail fluffing out. "Was it the rogues?" She asked. Moonleg only nodded. "We scented them again. There were at least three — hiding near the old badger set. Tangledfur tried to fight them off but... she took a bad hit to the shoulder."

Brightwing didn't hesitate. "Skypaw, fetch marigold and horsetail. Quickly!"

Skypaw darted to the herb stores, nose twitching as she dug through the piles. *Marigold, marigold— there!* She snatched a few leaves and spun around just as Lionclaw and Featherblink shouldered their way in, half-carrying Tangledfur between them.

Blood darkened her shoulder and chest fur, and she was shivering from the cold.

"Put her there," Brightwing ordered, pointing with her tail toward the moss nest near Ashtail. As soon as Tangledfur lay down, Brightwing pressed cobwebs to the wound while Skypaw chewed up the marigold leaves. The den filled with the sharp, earthy scent of herbs mixed with the metallic tang of blood. Tangledfur flinched but didn't cry out.

"We chased the rogues past the border," Lionclaw growled, pacing near the entrance. "They're getting bolder. If they set paw here again—"

Thrushstar's voice came from behind him, low and grim. "They will." His gaze swept over the den— to Tangledfur, to Brightwing, and finally to Skypaw. "And next time, we'll be ready."

For a heartbeat, thunder rumbled outside, shaking the ground

beneath their paws. Skypaw looked down at Tangledfur's wound, her stomach tightening. *How many more of us will StarClan have to heal before this ends?*

Skypaw sighed, pressing her paw against the cobweb. The other cats left the den to speak with Thrushstar, everyone but Brightwing. "She doesn't need any more pressure on the wound." Brightwing mewed, but Skypaw didn't listen.

A faint light glowed from her paws again. "She'll have a nasty infection if I don't heal her!" Skypaw argued. A few heartbeats later, Skypaw drew the cobweb back again. The blood was completely gone, and so was any sign of infection.

Brightwing's eyes widened. "Skypaw..." she breathed, staring at Tangledfur's shoulder. The wound was gone— not even a scar remained. Tangledfur's breathing had steadied, her pelt rising and falling in a calm rhythm.

Skypaw took a shaky step back. Her paws were still glowing faintly, like starlight caught beneath her fur, before the light faded away. "I —I had to do it," she whispered. "She would've gotten sick if I hadn't."

Brightwing's gaze flicked from Tangledfur to Skypaw, her expression unreadable. "That wasn't... ordinary healing," she murmured. "StarClan— Skypaw, what did you do?"

"I don't know," Skypaw confessed, her voice trembling. "It just happened. I could *feel* what she needed."

The rain outside drummed harder against the den roof. Brightwing glanced toward the entrance, lowering her voice. "You can't let anycat see that, Skypaw. Not even Thrushstar. Do you understand me?"

"But why?" Skypaw protested. "I helped her! Isn't that what medicine cats are *supposed* to do?"

"Because," Brightwing hissed softly, "the Clans fear what they don't understand. If they see you doing this, they'll think it's..." She trailed

off, guilt shining in her eyes.

Skypaw swallowed hard, her fur prickling. "But StarClan gave me this power," she said quietly, almost pleading.

Brightwing met her gaze, the faintest spark of worry in her eyes. "Then let's hope StarClan doesn't take it back. You need to only use it if it's necessary."

8.

It had been two sunrises since Badgerstar had brought the rogues home— but mostly everycat seemed to accept them. Saturn was staying in the nursery with Beeflight, both expecting kits anytime soon. Saturn wouldn't tell anycat whose kits they were, and most cats just assumed it were some other rogue that hadn't come with her.

The other rogues were Mouse, a shabby and small brown tom, Spikejaw— the only one to take on a warrior name— was a white-and-brown spotted tom, and Gravel was a gray, scarred she-cat with one blinded eye.

Whiteflame didn't trust any of them. And neither did Amberface or Rainsight, his littermates.

Redfang called for patrols, and every warrior and apprentice gathered. "Mudstrike, Springfoot, and Berryfang will go on a border patrol. Bring your apprentices." He meowed while Mottledpaw and Flamepaw joined their mentors sides. "Whiteflame will lead one hunting patrol, and Frostflower will lead the other. And Squidfur, Honeypaw, and Rowanleaf will go out to gather herbs for Sunnypool."

The patrols dispersed, Frostflower gathering Rainsight, Stungface, and Cloveryawn for her patrol. "Amberface!" Whiteflame called, "And er..." He paused, his gaze raking over the other cats. "Spikejaw and Dawntuft."

Spikejaw looked surprised to be chosen, but the former-rogue purred anyways.

Amberface padded up beside her brother, tail flicking. "You really had to bring *him*?" she muttered under her breath.

Whiteflame kept his voice low. "Better to keep an eye on him than let him wander camp alone."

"Fair point," she sighed. "Let's just hope he doesn't start any trouble."

The patrol slipped through the undergrowth, the forest still damp from the morning dew. Birds were beginning to return to the trees, their songs soft and hesitant after leaf-bare's silence. Whiteflame's paws itched to hunt— but his ears kept twitching toward Spikejaw's pawsteps. They were too loud, too uneven, the gait of a cat who'd never truly learned to move silently through the forest.

"So," Dawntuft began awkwardly, trying to break the tension. "Spikejaw, was it? How are you finding ShadowClan?"

Spikejaw lifted his head, his whiskers twitching. "Better than sleeping under a Twoleg nest," he replied with a short, sharp laugh. "You cats eat well and fight hard. I can get used to that."

Whiteflame exchanged a glance with Amberface. She didn't look convinced either. "Clan life isn't just fighting and eating," she said coldly. "It's about loyalty."

Spikejaw's tail twitched. "I said I was loyal, didn't I?" He growled. "Words are easy," Amberface muttered.

Whiteflame raised his tail to silence them. "Quiet. I smell something." He opened his mouth to taste the air— vole, fresh. "There." He flicked his ear toward a patch of ferns. "Amberface, circle around. Dawntuft, flank me."

Spikejaw crouched, but his tail brushed a twig, snapping it. The vole darted away before anycat could move. Amberface let out a sharp hiss. "Fox-dung! Watch where you're putting your paws!"

Spikejaw's ears flattened. "I said I was sorry!" He hissed back, his ears pinning. "Sorry doesn't feed the Clan," she snapped.

Whiteflame stepped between them. "Enough! We'll find more prey deeper in the forest." He glared at Spikejaw. "Stay quiet and follow my lead." He ordered, stalking deeper into the forest. Amberface let out a quiet scoff and followed him.

"It'd be wiser to split into groups. The prey will hear us if we stomp

around like a group of badgers." Dawntuft meowed, casting a glance to Spikejaw. "Come with me, Spikejaw. I'll teach you to be quieter with your pawsteps."

Spikejaw didn't argue, just followed Dawntuft. Amberface turned on Whiteflame. "Why did you bring a rogue on patrol?" She demanded again. "I didn't have much of a choice! Everycat is sick with greencough, and Badgerstar would be upset if we were excluding the rogues." He defended himself, white fur fluffing up.

Amberface scoffed, her claws sinking into the still-frosted dirt. "I'm going hunting on my own." She hissed before bounding ahead of her brother.

Whiteflame let out a frustrated sigh, watching his sister's tail disappear into the ferns. "Fox-heart," he muttered, though worry clawed at his belly. He knew Amberface could take care of herself—but rogues didn't always fight fair.

He scented the air again. The smell of vole had faded, replaced by something metallic and sharp. Blood.

His fur bristled. "Amberface?" he called quietly. No answer. The forest was silent except for the drip of melting frost.

Whiteflame padded forward, every sense alert. The blood-scent grew stronger until he reached a patch of churned-up earth. Clumps of white fur clung to the brambles, snagged on sharp thorns. His heart began to pound.

Before he could move, a rustle behind him made him whirl around — claws unsheathed— only to see Dawntuft emerging from the undergrowth, Spikejaw at her heels. "Whiteflame?" Dawntuft asked, lowering her catch of a small mouse. "Where's Amberface?"

"She went off alone," Whiteflame replied, scanning the trees again. "And I smell blood."

Spikejaw sniffed the air and frowned. "That's not cat blood," he said after a moment. "Smells more like a rabbit that got itself caught on something."

Whiteflame didn't relax. "We'll find her just in case. Dawntuft—take the left side. Spikejaw, with me." He ordered, trying to sound calmer than he really was. They pushed through the brambles, following the faint trail of disturbed leaves. The scent trail grew fresher until Whiteflame heard pawsteps ahead.

"Amberface?" A shape moved in the shadows— then Amberface's voice snapped back, "Quiet, mouse-brains! You'll scare it off!"

Whiteflame's fur lay flat again as he spotted her crouched beside a small clearing. A plump thrush pecked at the ground just fox-lengths away. Amberface sprang and caught it neatly between her paws.

"See?" she meowed around her catch. "Perfectly fine. And I even caught something while you three stomped around like foxes in a fit."

Whiteflame rolled his eyes but couldn't help purring softly. "You nearly scared me to StarClan."

But as the patrol turned to head back toward camp, none of them noticed a pair of cold, yellow eyes glinting from the shadows—watching them go.

9.

Thistleheart and Otterpaw were preparing to leave for the Half-Moon gathering when Beaverstar walked in. "May I speak with Thistleheart? Alone." His blue gaze felt like claws against Otterpaw's pelt. She nodded, quickly scampering out of the den. Cloudpaw, her littermate, bounded over towards her.

"Hey, Otterpaw! How's your training going? Have you had a message from StarClan yet? Is it true that you're going to speak with them at the moonpool?" Cloudpaw's questions spilled out, and Otterpaw wasn't sure which one to answer first.

"My training is going great, Thistleheart and I haven't had any signs from StarClan, and I really hope they'll speak with me tonight." Otterpaw's ears pinned at the thought. If StarClan didn't speak to her, Thistleheart would think she wasn't a good medicine cat!

What if I can't be a medicine cat? Otterpaw wondered, her paws prickling at the thought. "Otterpaw!" Thistleheart called from the medicine den. He beckoned with his tail for her to follow him. "Come on. It's time to go."

Otterpaw padded after Thistleheart, glancing back toward Beaverstar's den. She couldn't help but wonder what her leader had wanted to say—he'd looked tense, even for him.

"Don't fall behind," Thistleheart mewed, his tone gentle but distracted. He was carrying herbs wrapped in a dock leaf bundle, the faint scent of thyme and juniper following him as they slipped out of camp.

The forest was quiet under the silver moonlight, their pawsteps softened by the thin layer of snow. The only sound was the trickle of the river nearby. Otterpaw's stomach churned. What if StarClan doesn't think I'm ready? What if they don't speak to me at all?

"You're quiet," Thistleheart remarked after a few heartbeats.

"I'm just... nervous," Otterpaw admitted, her fur brushing his flank. "What if StarClan doesn't have anything to say?"

Thistleheart purred softly. "They always have something to say. It's just up to us to listen closely enough."

That eased her a little—until she caught the faintest scent of something foreign on the breeze. Rogue. Otterpaw froze, tail bristling. "Thistleheart—"

"I smell it too," he said quickly, his tone sharp now. "Stay close."

They continued more cautiously until the smell faded near the edge of the river. "Probably crossed from ShadowClan territory," Thistleheart murmured. "Beaverstar will want to know."

"Who's this?" Sunnypool, the ShadowClan medicine cat asked kindly. *I thought ShadowClan was supposed to be scary.*

"This is Otterpaw. She's my apprentice." Thistleheart meowed, placing his tail-tip on Otterpaw's shoulder. Even though his eyes were blind, it felt like he were staring right at her. "Let's head inside." Morningfur, one of the WindClan medicine cats mewed.

Otterpaw nodded, but her heart wouldn't stop pounding. The river gleamed in front of them, dark and cold as they crossed the stepping-stones toward the Moonpool.

As she reached the other side, a chill swept over her. The sky was cloudless—but the stars above seemed dimmer than usual.

Thistleheart cleared his throat, standing next to the moonpool with his blind blue gaze on Otterpaw. "Otterpaw, is it your wish to become a medicine cat?" He asked. "Yes!" Otterpaw answered excitedly, her brown fur puffing out. "Then I call upon StarClan," He lifted his muzzle to the sky, "to look down upon this young cat, and guide her path as a medicine cat."

It's nearly official. Otterpaw thought, looking down at the pool of water. If StarClan came to her tonight, she would be a real medicine cat.

"StarClan..." she whispered. "Please don't forget me tonight." Thistleheart gave her a reassuring look before padding ahead. But as Otterpaw followed, she could've sworn she saw movement in the reflection of the water—a ripple shaped like eyes, watching from the dark below.

The other medicine cats pressed their noses to the cool puddle of water, and Otterpaw did the same. *Please, StarClan. Speak to me.* She begged silently while she closed her eyes. Soon, she fell asleep.

When she opened her eyes, she was still around the moonpool, but the other medicine cats were gone. "Thistleheart? Thistleheart, where are you?" She called, but there was silence. A cat with stars in her pelt reflected in the moonpool before appearing in front of Otterpaw. The young she-cat's eyes shone. *They didn't forget about me!*

The she-cat before her was a tortoiseshell with sleek fur, and held a kind amber gaze. "Hello, Otterpaw." She meowed, "I am Applepool. I was the RiverClan medicine cat many seasons ago, before Beaverstar was even clan leader."

Otterpaw's eyes stretched wide in disbelief, but she stayed quiet so Applepool could continue. "Since you're a medicine cat apprentice, I have come to you with an important prophecy." She meowed.

"A prophecy!" Otterpaw exclaimed, her paws prickling. "Come with me." Applepool beckoned with her tail, and Otterpaw followed.

"At first, the prophecy was; *There will be two with powers like no other to end the wrath of the badger.* But that prophecy has changed." Applepool turned to face Otterpaw again. Around them, four cats appeared. One with a white pelt and pale orange siamese markings, one tortoiseshell she-cat, one small cream-colored tom, and one pure white she-cat. "That's a medicine cat apprentice!" Otterpaw realized, looking at the white she-cat.

"Skypaw," Applepool purred before continuing. "StarClan was wrong about the first prophecy." She admitted, looking around at the four cats. Otterpaw's eyes filled with stars for a moment, strange voices whispering all around her. *"Two must become four; only then will the*

battle be won."

Otterpaw awoke next to the moonpool, looking around to see the other medicine cats, each still asleep. Looking into the moonpool again, her eyes shone with excitement. *I'm a medicine cat now.* She realized, the prophecy ringing in her ears.

10.

Skypaw cast a glance to Otterpaw before dipping her nose to the cool water of the moonpool. Once she fell asleep, she was quickly greeted by a star-pelted tom. "Greetings, young one." The StarClan warrior dipped his head to her. *Aren't I supposed to be the one bowing?* She wondered, but didn't dare to question him.

"I'm Adderblaze. And I'm here to speak with you about the prophecy." He meowed kindly, beginning to walk seemingly on air. The lake appeared around them as they began to walk.

Then, Geckonose, Whiteflame, and Brackenpaw all appeared with StarClan cats each leading them. Around the four, the lake began to change into an open field. Badgerstar led cats from all four clans, while Geckonose, Whiteflame, and Brackenpaw all stood together. They had fewer cats, also from every clan.

"Where am I?" Skypaw blurted. The vision shifted to the clans medicine cats, an older-looking Skypaw among them. Excitement pricked at her paws, but it didn't last long, as the vision shifted back to the battle.

In the vision, Badgerstar yowled an inaudible command and the cats all lunged towards each other. Blood splattered across the clearing, cats from both sides falling limp. *They're killing each other!* Skypaw realized with a wave of horror.

Badgerstar and the Whiteflame in the vision tussled, clawing and biting at each other's necks. Whiteflame pinned Badgerstar down and then gave him the killing bite. Whiteflame's neck fur stood on edge.

"I have to take all of his nine lives?!" He practically shrieked. The golden-furred she-cat in front of him shook her head. "StarClan never gave him his nine lives." She meowed calmly. The reaction from Brackenpaw wasn't quite as calm. "He's a liar!" He hissed, flexing his claws angrily.

"Snake-tongue!" Whiteflame spat, his voice thick with fury. Skypaw froze. She'd never heard that phrase outside of ShadowClan. It must be an insult from their own Clan, something sharp and venomous that no other clan dared to use.

Skypaw could barely breathe. Around her, the field was chaos—claws flashing, yowls splitting the air. The stench of blood and fear clogged her throat. She wanted to help, to run into the fight, but her paws wouldn't move. It was like watching a nightmare she couldn't wake from.

Whiteflame stood over Badgerstar's body, his white fur streaked with red. The golden-pelted StarClan she-cat—whoever she was—spoke words Skypaw couldn't hear, but she could see the shock ripple through him. *Badgerstar never had his nine lives.*

Her mind reeled. A leader without StarClan's blessing? That wasn't just wrong—it was impossible. *Wasn't it?*

The battle around her flickered like light reflecting off water. She caught glimpses of Geckonose and Brackenpaw fighting side by side, their pelts blurring in and out of the mist. And then... herself.

Older. Stronger. Standing beside three other cats—*the same ones she'd just seen.* "What—what's happening?" Skypaw gasped, but Adderblaze didn't answer this time. He was watching her, his blue eyes bright with sorrow.

"This is what StarClan wanted you to see," he murmured. "The truth must be known when the time is right."

"What truth?" she demanded, her voice cracking. "What am I supposed to do?" She begged, but there was no response from Adderblaze.

But before he could respond, the world shattered like ice under paw. Skypaw jolted awake, breath coming in ragged gasps. The Moonpool shimmered faintly beside her, calm and unbroken—as if nothing had happened. The other medicine cats were stirring, whispering quietly among themselves, but Skypaw barely heard them.

Across the pool, Otterpaw was awake too, her eyes wide and distant. Their gazes met for a single heartbeat— and in that moment, Skypaw knew.

They'd seen the same thing. And whatever StarClan had shown them... it was only the beginning.

Next to Skypaw, Brightwing stirred. Her shimmering green eyes slowly blinked open, and she stood up. Her fur wasn't ruffled like Skypaw's was— and she could tell her mentor hadn't been given the same prophecy.

Perhaps she already knew. Skypaw thought. Brightwing was older, and had been a medicine cat for much longer. And so had the others. They probably knew as well. *But they don't know about me.* And they couldn't know. Not yet.

All of the medicine cats said their goodbyes. Brightwing and Skypaw made the trip home. Even after having such a vision, Skypaw couldn't tell Brightwing about it. But just to her luck, her mentor could tell that something was wrong. "Did StarClan give you the prophecy?" Brightwing asked. Skypaw shook her head. "I knew about the prophecy already... they gave me a vision." Skypaw admitted, her blue eyes wide and fixated on the grass beneath her paws.

Brightwing tilted her head, her steps slowing as they padded through the dew-soaked grass. "A vision?" she echoed softly, her tone careful—calm, but curious. "What did you see?"

Skypaw hesitated. The image of blood splattering across the field flashed before her eyes again, the cries of dying cats echoing in her ears. "It was..." Her voice trembled, and she swallowed hard. "There was a battle. Cats from every Clan were fighting. I saw Whiteflame, Brackenpaw, and Geckonose—fighting together. Badgerstar was there too, and..." She paused, staring down at her paws. "Whiteflame killed him."

Brightwing's ears flicked, but she didn't interrupt. She just nodded for Skypaw to continue. "They said... Badgerstar doesn't have nine lives." The words tumbled out before she could stop them. "That he

was never truly a leader."

For a long moment, Brightwing said nothing. The only sound was the faint rustle of wind in the grass. Skypaw's heart thudded painfully. *Did I say too much?*

At last, Brightwing sighed. "StarClan shows us many things, Skypaw. Some are memories. Some are warnings. And some are possibilities." Her gaze softened. "But remember this—prophecies are not always what they seem."

Skypaw blinked, confused. "What do you mean?" Skypaw asked. "I mean that what you saw might not happen," Brightwing mewed gently. "Or it might happen differently than you think. StarClan rarely speaks plainly, and their visions can change with the choices we make."

Skypaw nodded, but her chest still felt tight. "It didn't *feel* like a possibility. It felt real."

Brightwing brushed her tail along her apprentice's back. "Then you must carry it carefully," she murmured. "Don't speak of it to anyone — not until StarClan makes their meaning clear."

Skypaw gave a small nod, her fur prickling with unease. She wanted to trust her mentor's calmness, but deep down, she couldn't shake the image of Whiteflame's blood-soaked fur or the echo of Adderblaze's voice in her head. *Brightwing doesn't understand.*

"Two must become four," she whispered to herself, her voice almost lost to the wind. And for the first time, she realized she wasn't sure if she wanted to know what came next.

11.

A yowl rang out throughout the camp. A golden pelt flashed across the camp and into the nursery, followed by Badgerstar's dark brown pelt. *Beeflight must be giving birth.* Whiteflame thought, but then Saturn crossed his mind. *Maybe she'll tell us whose kits they are!*

Curiosity got the better of him. Whiteflame crept into the nursery, where Sunnypool had his forepaws placed on Saturn's belly. Beeflight was doing her best to calm the other she-cat, but it was clear that she was in a lot of pain.

Saturn lay in the moss, her sides heaving, claws digging into the nest as another contraction seized her. "Keep breathing," Sunnypool urged, his tone firm but gentle. "You're doing well."

Beeflight hovered nearby, eyes wide with worry. "Is she alright?" she whispered."She will be," Sunnypool said quickly. "It's just her first kitting."

Whiteflame's gaze flicked to the back of the den—Badgerstar was standing there, still and silent, his amber eyes glowing like fire in the shadows. He looked nervous.

Saturn gave a final, wrenching yowl, and the sharp squeals of newborn kits filled the nursery. Sunnypool bent down, murmuring encouragements as he cleared the kits' breathing and nudged them toward her belly."Three," he announced softly. "Three strong kits."

Saturn slumped against the moss, trembling but smiling faintly as the tiny shapes squirmed beside her. "They're beautiful," she whispered, her voice hoarse.

Badgerstar stepped closer, his tail brushing lightly over the smallest kit. "They'll be ShadowClan's future," he said. His tone was calm, but there was something heavy behind it—something almost loving.*Almost.*

Beeflight blinked, confusion flashing in her eyes. "ShadowClan's?" she echoed. "But Saturn isn't—" Beeflight didn't get to finish. "She *is* ShadowClan now," Badgerstar cut her off, his gaze narrowing. "And so are her kits."

No cat spoke. Even Sunnypool ducked his head in uneasy silence. Whiteflame backed away from the den, his chest tight. The cold night air hit his face like a wave when he slipped outside, but it did nothing to steady his racing thoughts.

Those kits... they're Badgerstar's, aren't they? His fur bristled from neck to tail. Most cats would be happy to have younger siblings, but Whiteflame wasn't. He didn't want half-siblings, much less ones with rogue blood in them. He shrunk back into the warriors den, but he could still hear Badgerstar's voice.

"I was so worried that you would die like Pearlface did..." He meowed softly. Whiteflame was surprised his father could feel anything— much less love.

The next morning, Badgerstar called a clan meeting. "Saturn has given birth to her kits! *Our* kits." Pride gleamed in his yellow eyes. Amberface bristled, but her jaws stayed clamped shut. It was Cloveryawn who stood up. "You had kits with a rogue?!" She snapped. Whiteflame remembered that Pearlface had been her sister before her death. *She thinks her sister was replaced by a rogue.*

Mewls came from the nursery, the newborn kits having no idea that the clan already were talking about them.

"She is not a rogue!" Badgerstar hissed, his claws unsheathing. "She is ShadowClan now, and so are the others!"

Mouse, Spikejaw, and Gravel all grinned and puffed their chests out, gazes all on Cloveryawn. "Yeah, Cloveryawn. We're your clanmates." Mouse repeated, but he sounded more like a snake than a cat. "And so are Saturn's kits." Gravel added as her neck fur bristled, clearly being protective of her friends.

The camp went silent except for the faint, muffled mewls drifting from the nursery. Whiteflame's gaze flicked toward the den. *Those*

kits didn't ask for any of this, he thought grimly.

But when he looked back at Badgerstar—standing tall, eyes burning with pride—Whiteflame felt a chill ripple down his spine. *ShadowClan isn't his Clan anymore,* he realized. *It's his army. And it's only going to grow.*

For a long, tense moment, no one moved. Then, like a gust of wind rippling through reeds, the Clan began to murmur.

"She's not even Clanborn..."
"Rogues raising kits in *our* nursery?"
"Badgerstar's lost his mind."

Badgerstar flicked his tail sharply, and silence fell again. "Anyone who questions Saturn's loyalty," he growled, "questions *mine.*"

That was enough to quiet even Cloveryawn. Her eyes burned, but she sank back into the crowd with a flick of her ear. "Meeting dismissed," Badgerstar finished curtly before turning toward the nursery, tail brushing Saturn's flank as he passed.

Cats began to disperse, some muttering under their breath, others silent and wary. Amberface's claws raked the earth as she stalked toward the warriors' den. Whiteflame followed her. "Amberface—"

"I don't want to hear it," she hissed without looking at him. "He's replacing Pearlface's memory with a rogue." Her amber eyes glimmered with fury and grief. "And the Clan's just supposed to accept it."

Whiteflame flattened his ears. "I don't trust her either. But... those kits didn't ask for this."

Amberface rounded on him, tail lashing. "And what about the rest of us? What happens when Badgerstar decides the rest of us aren't 'loyal enough' for his new Clan?"

Her words made his stomach twist. From across the clearing, Gravel and Mouse lounged near the fresh-kill pile, clearly pleased with themselves. Spikejaw shared tongues with Dawntuft as if he'd been born in the Clan, his purr too loud to be sincere.

Rainsight and Frostflower whispered quietly by the camp wall, their eyes darting toward Badgerstar's den. "This is wrong," Rainsight muttered. "Bringing in rogues is one thing—but calling their kits *his heirs?*"

Whiteflame's gaze lifted to the nursery. Through the bramble screen, he could hear Saturn's soft purr and the faint suckling of newborns. "They'll grow up thinking they belong here," Frostflower murmured. "And maybe they will. But the rest of us will never forget where they came from."

Whiteflame didn't answer. His claws flexed in the dirt as Badgerstar emerged again, exchanging a few low words with Gravel before disappearing into his den. The air around camp felt heavier—like a storm waiting to break.

ShadowClan used to stand for loyalty and strength, Whiteflame thought bitterly. *Now it only stands for Badgerstar.*

12.

Brackenpaw sighed as he approached the elders den with mouse bile and moss. Snaketail was sick with greencough— or at least, what Brackenpaw assumed was greencough. It sounded worse than that, though. But for now, he didn't have a mentor. Not until Branchstar decided to give him a temporary one.

"Hello, Brackenpaw." Hawkjaw greeted with a dip of his head. Raspycloud wasn't in such a good mood, however. "Yeah, hi. I assume you're here to take care of our ticks?" She sounded uninterested in saying hello to him.

Hawkjaw gave his made a nudge with his forepaw. "Be kind, Raspycloud. Without him, there'd be no other apprentices! What would we do about our ticks then?" He purred, while she just rolled her eyes.

Brackenpaw set the moss down beside Hawkjaw's nest and tried not to wrinkle his nose at the sharp scent of mouse bile. "It's okay," he meowed, dipping the tip of his tail politely. "I don't mind helping."

"Good," Raspycloud rasped, settling down with a huff. "Then get on with it, before the ticks decide to move into my ears."

Brackenpaw bit back a laugh—he'd learned that the elder didn't appreciate apprentices laughing at her, even if it wasn't meant unkindly. Carefully, he dipped a bit of moss into the bile and leaned closer to her pelt. The ticks were stubborn this time, clinging tight.

"Hold still," he murmured. "I *am* holding still," she grumbled, twitching her tail. "If I were any stiller, I'd be crow-food."

Hawkjaw chuckled softly from his nest. "You'll have to forgive her, Brackenpaw. Raspycloud's never liked apprentices touching her fur."

"Because they never do it right," she replied instantly, though

Brackenpaw could see the faintest glimmer of amusement in her clouded eyes.

He finished her pelt and moved on to Hawkjaw, who leaned forward and whispered low enough that Raspycloud couldn't hear. "You're doing fine, Brackenpaw. You've been working harder than most warriors lately."

Brackenpaw's ears flicked in surprise. "I just want to help," he admitted. "With Snaketail sick, and no mentor... it's something useful to do."

Hawkjaw nodded, his half-blind gaze warm. "Sometimes, the smallest jobs matter most. Remember that."

As Brackenpaw cleaned up the moss and bile, Raspycloud mumbled something that almost sounded like *thank you*. He decided not to comment on it—just dipped his head and padded toward the den entrance, the voices of the elders fading behind him.

Outside, the wind was cool and sharp. The camp was quiet, too quiet. Brackenpaw looked toward the medicine den, where the scent of sickness hung heavy in the air. He couldn't shake the feeling that something worse than greencough was spreading across the Clans.

"Let all cats fast enough to hunt on the moor, gather beneath the tallrock for a clan meeting!" Branchstar yowled from atop the tallrock. Brackenpaw sat down next to Foxblaze, whose orange fur was puffed out in alarm. "As you know, a sickness has been spreading through our clan. StarClan has finally spoken to Morningfur and Thornwhisker." Branchstar continued before the two medicine cats stepped forward.

"Many seasons ago, rogues had brought to ShadowClan an illness called yellowcough. It's much worse than greencough, but luckily, the cure— lungwort grows here on the moor." Morningfur announced. "Then why do we need an announcement about it?" Coralclaw asked impatiently, curling her tail around her kits.

Thornwhisker narrowed his eyes at her, his tail twitching irritably.

"Because the cure *only* grows on the moor. The other clans won't have access to it." He said. "We want warriors to bring some to the other clans." Morningfur added calmly.

Pollengleam nodded, signaling she would organize patrols. "Brookfall and Antdrift, you will go to RiverClan. Sunbreeze and Brackenpaw will go to ThunderClan, and Horsewillow and Charcoalbark will go to ShadowClan." She meowed before the meeting was dismissed.

Morningfur and Thornwhisker dropped bundles of green-and-yellow spotted leaves in front of each of the patrols before they all set off.

Brackenpaw bent to sniff the herbs before they left. The scent was sharp and bitter, stinging his nose, but something about it felt powerful—like it really could drive away sickness. *So this is lungwort,* he thought, glancing toward Morningfur. The medicine cat gave him an encouraging nod.

"Stay close to Sunbreeze," Pollengleam reminded him as they started toward the camp entrance. "ThunderClan's forest is thicker than what you're used to, Brackenpaw. Don't go wandering off."

"Yes, Pollengleam," he meowed, dipping his head respectfully before trotting after Sunbreeze. The ginger warrior led the way across the windy moor. The air was cold and sharp, but the clouds had finally parted enough for a bit of sun to warm their backs. "You've never been to ThunderClan territory before, have you?" Sunbreeze asked after a while.

Brackenpaw shook his head. "No, I've only seen their cats at Gatherings." His father flicked his tail toward the line of trees ahead. "You'll smell the difference right away. Forest cats always reek of bark and leaves." His tone was light, but Brackenpaw could tell he was uneasy—no cat liked crossing into another Clan's territory uninvited, even if it was for something good.

When they reached the border, Sunbreeze lifted his head and called out. "ThunderClan! We come in peace!"

The undergrowth rustled almost immediately. Tangledfur and

Acornheart emerged, their pelts bristling until they caught the familiar scent of lungwort. "WindClan?" Tangledfur meowed, her eyes narrowing. "Why are you here?"

"We've brought a cure," Sunbreeze explained, setting down his bundle. "Your Clan's been sick, hasn't it? Our medicine cats say it's yellowcough, not greencough. This will help."

Acornheart stepped forward, his eyes wide. "You're serious? You'd share your herbs with us?"

Brackenpaw felt a rush of pride, even if his paws trembled a little. "StarClan wants all the Clans to be healthy," he said, repeating Morningfur's words from earlier.

For a moment, the ThunderClan cats exchanged surprised glances. Then Tangledfur nodded slowly. "Wait here. I'll get Brightwing."

As she bounded off into the trees, Brackenpaw glanced around the forest—so different from the open moor, shadows dancing through every branch. He couldn't help but wonder how the cats here ever hunted in such crowded spaces.

Within moments, Brightwing and Skypaw appeared. The medicine cat's gaze softened as she saw the herbs. "Lungwort," she murmured. "Thank StarClan. ThunderClan owes WindClan a great debt."

Brackenpaw looked down, suddenly shy. "It was... nothing," he muttered, but the warmth in Brightwing's eyes told him it wasn't nothing at all.

"Thank you, Brackenpaw." Skypaw dipped her head to the WindClan apprentice, and the fellow prophecy cat. He dipped his head in return before he and Sunbreeze turned to head back home.

13.

"Skypaw, Skypaw!" Beetlepaw raced into the medicine den. His fur was puffed out in excitement. "What? Where's the battle?" She asked, only half-joking. "There's no battle, mouse-brain! It's my warrior assessment!" Beetlepaw announced excitedly, bouncing in place happily.

Beechpaw followed him inside the medicine den, a proud grin on her face. "We're getting our warrior names today." She boasted. "And you'll still be Sky*paw*."

"A medicine cat has to train for longer." Skypaw hissed defensively. "Why? Because you're too mouse-brained to learn?" Beechpaw asked sarcastically, a cocky gleam in her eyes.

"Medicine cats have more knowledge than plain old warriors, that's why." Brightwing interrupted, sitting next to Skypaw with her tail curled over her forepaws. That seemed to shut up Beechpaw pretty quickly. Skypaw gave her mentor a grateful nod as Beechpaw and Beetlepaw left.

She opened her mouth to thank Brightwing, but the other she-cat spoke first. "You need to stop letting Beechpaw pick on you like that." She meowed, her whiskers twitching irritably. Skypaw sighed, separating herbs into their respective groups.

"We used to be close, back in the nursery." She admitted, her blue eyes softening as she thought of the better days with her sister. "I remember. You two were like a bundle of berries— attached at the tail-tip. Nothing could separate you two." Brightwing seemed to be thinking of older days, too. *It seemed then like nothing would change.*

"Now everything separates us. All because she will be a warrior and I'll be a medicine cat." Skypaw sighed. Brightwing bristled next to her, placing a paw on her shoulder. "Skypaw, have you always wished to be a medicine cat?" She asked. "Yes." Skypaw didn't hesitate.

"Have you ever wished to be a warrior?" She questioned again. Skypaw thought for a few moments before she shook her head. "No. I want to be a medicine cat." She decided.

Brightwing smiled, pressing her nose to her apprentice's forehead. "Then you shall be a medicine cat, young one. It won't matter what Beechpaw says in seasons to come. With the powers in your paws and the knowledge in your head, you will be the best medicine cat ThunderClan has ever seen." Brightwing whispered, her eyes gleaming like the stars in the night sky.

Brightwing padded up to Thrushstar as the Clan began to settle for the night, her pale ginger fur glowing faintly in the moonlight. The leader turned his head toward her, his tail flicking. "Brightwing," he greeted. "You've come about the ceremonies tomorrow, I presume?"

"I have," Brightwing meowed, dipping her head. "Beetlepaw and Twigpaw are ready to be made warriors. But Beechpaw—" she hesitated before continuing, "—Beechpaw isn't."

Thrushstar's brow furrowed. "Not ready?" he echoed. "Flashwhisker says her training's complete."

"It may be," Brightwing admitted, "but her heart isn't. She mocks Skypaw, disrespects her Clanmates, and shows no gratitude toward the older warriors—or toward you, for that matter."

Thrushstar's tail twitched thoughtfully. "I've noticed," he said quietly. "She speaks as though she's already above them all."

Brightwing nodded. "Let her wait two moons—until Skypaw finishes her training. It will give her time to mature... and to see that being a warrior means more than skill in battle."

For a long moment, Thrushstar was silent. Then he sighed. "Very well. Beetlepaw and Twigpaw will earn their names at moonhigh. Beechpaw will wait." His gaze softened. "You always see what lies beneath the fur, Brightwing."

Brightwing dipped her head respectfully. "I only hope she learns before her pride blinds her completely." As she turned to leave,

Thrushstar murmured to himself, "For her sake, so do

The clearing glowed in the light of the setting sun, the air thick with excitement. ThunderClan gathered beneath the Highrock as Thrushstar's yowl rang out. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather here beneath the Highrock for a Clan meeting!"

Skypaw padded out of the medicine den to sit beside Brightwing, her fur brushing her mentor's as the Clan quieted. Thrushstar stood tall, his eyes warm as he looked down at the two apprentices before him.

"Beetlepaw, Twigpaw," he began, his voice echoing across the clearing. "You have both trained hard to understand the ways of your ancestors, and it is time for you to become warriors."

He turned first to Beetlepaw. "Beetlepaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do," Beetlepaw said, his chest puffed out proudly. "Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Beetlepaw, from this moment forward you will be known as Beetleflight. StarClan honors your determination and hunting skill, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan."

The crowd erupted in cheers: "Beetleflight! Beetleflight!"

Thrushstar nodded, then turned to Twigpaw. "Twigpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do," Twigpaw meowed, her voice steady but glowing with excitement. "Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Twigpaw, from this moment forward you will be known as Twigdance. StarClan honors your grace and quick thinking, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan."

The Clan cheered again: "Twigdance! Twigdance!"

Skypaw joined in, her voice blending with the rest of her Clanmates', but when she caught sight of Beechpaw, her sister's tail

was twitching, her amber eyes burning with envy.

When the cheering faded, Beechpaw marched toward the Highrock, head held high. "Thrushstar," she said sharply, "what about me? I finished my training moons ago. Why am I not being named?"

The clearing grew still. Thrushstar's expression softened, though his tone remained steady. "Brightwing and I have spoken. She believes your ceremony should wait two moons—until Skypaw's training is complete."

Beechpaw's ears flattened. "What?" she spat. "She's a *medicine cat!* She's not even supposed to—"

"That's enough, Beechpaw," Thrushstar interrupted, his gaze hardening. "You will wait. This decision stands."

Beechpaw turned and stalked away, her fur bristling with fury. Skypaw's stomach twisted as her sister's glare caught her like a thorn to the paw. That night, when the camp finally quieted, Skypaw sat beside Brightwing outside the medicine den. "She's angry," she murmured.

Brightwing nodded. "She'll understand one day. You both will." Skypaw looked up at the stars, heart aching. "I just hope she'll still want to be my sister when that day comes."

14.

Only a moon had passed since Saturn gave birth to her kits— Stormkit, Thornkit, and Starlingkit— when Beeflight had her second litter. She'd given birth to three she-kits; Marshkit, Larkkit, and Graykit, and one tom, Sparrowkit. Honeypaw, Mottledpaw, and Flamepaw all adored their new younger siblings. Whiteflame wished he could love his own half-kin that way.

"All cats whose claws are sharp enough, gather beneath the Shaderock for a clan meeting!" Badgerstar's yowl rang out through the camp. "We have three apprentices who have completed their final assessments. Berryfang, how did Flamepaw do?"

"Flamepaw did very well." Berryfang began, looking towards her apprentice with a proud gaze. "He caught two mice on his own, and a vole when team hunting with Rainsight."

Badgerstar simply nodded before turning to Squidfur. "How did Honeypaw do?" He asked. "Honeypaw caught a fish and a frog on her own, and a squirrel when team hunting. It was a messy catch, but she ended up giving it the killing bite in the end." Squidfur answered calmly.

Once more, the leader nodded, then turned to Mudstrike. His yellow gaze softened as his son puffed out his chest fur pridefully.

"Mottledpaw caught a raven and two fish on his own, and a mouse with Springfoot. The raven was a somewhat messy catch." Mudstrike mumbled the last part.

All three apprentices gazed up at Badgerstar hopefully. He smiled down pridefully at his grandkits. "Flamepaw, Mottledpaw, and Honeypaw. Do you all promise to defend ShadowClan, even at the cost of your own life?" He asked. "I do!" All three young cats answered at the same time.

"Mottledpaw, from this moment forward you will be known as

Mottledtail. StarClan honors your loyalty and diligence. Flamepaw, from this moment forward you will be known as Flamestep. StarClan honors your protectiveness and energy. Honeypaw, from this moment forward you will be known as Honeyshine. StarClan honors your kindness and fairness." When Badgerstar finished, the clan cheered out the new warriors names.

"Mottledtail! Flamestep! Honeyshine!" Even Beeflight yowled her kits names from the nursery. The newly-made warriors all held their heads and tails high.

In the nursery, Saturn's kits were already stumbling around outside of the entrance. She was watching them with the fondness only a mother could show to her own kits. *I wonder what it's like to have a real mother.* Whiteflame couldn't help but think.

Rainsight was watching his young half-siblings as well, but not with jealousy in his gaze. "I really hope that I'll have kits someday." He muttered softly.

Whiteflame's ears perked at that. "With Berryfang?" He asked, assuming that the obvious choice would be his brother's mate. But Rainsight only shook his head guiltily. "With Frostflower." He admitted. Whiteflame's eyes stretched wide in shock. "What?! But Berryfang is your mate!" He hissed, fighting the urge to claw Rainsight's ears off.

"She *was* my mate." He corrected crossly. "And it was all because I look like Molepaw!" Whiteflame had to suppress the wail of a lost kit, and he could tell Rainsight was too. They hardly ever talked about their littermate, who never lived to be a warrior because he was killed by Badgerstar.

Sunnypool and I are the only ones who know the truth. He remembered. "She confessed yesterday that she had hoped I'd fill the spot Molepaw's death had left in her heart. But she was wrong." Rainsight dipped his head, his ears pinning.

Whiteflame's claws dug into the ground. "You shouldn't even *say* his name out here," he hissed under his breath. "If Badgerstar hears—"

"I don't care if he hears!" Rainsight snapped, his voice cracking halfway through. The flash of anger in his eyes dulled almost instantly. "I'm tired of pretending he's some great leader. Molepaw should've been alive—should've been *here*."

Whiteflame glanced around quickly. No cat seemed to be paying attention to them—most were still clustered around the new warriors, cheering and pressing pelts. Even so, his fur stood on end.

"Keep your voice down," he whispered harshly. "If he finds out you've been saying that, you'll end up like—"

Rainsight met his gaze. "Like Molepaw?" The words cut through the air like claws. For a moment, neither of them spoke.

Then Rainsight sighed and turned his eyes back toward the nursery, watching Saturn curl her tail protectively around her kits. "I just... want something good to come out of this Clan again. Something *pure.* Frostflower makes me feel like maybe it's possible."

Whiteflame swallowed hard. His brother's words were heavy with hope—and danger. "Just be careful," he murmured. "Badgerstar's watching everyone these days. Especially the ones he calls his own kin."

Rainsight didn't respond. His gaze lingered on the nursery one last time before he padded away, tail dragging through the dirt.

Whiteflame stayed where he was, the echoes of cheers fading behind him. *Mottledtail, Flamestep, Honeyshine...* The names should've sounded like victory. But instead, all he could hear was the name that no cat was allowed to speak.

Molepaw.

15.

"Geckonose!" A hissing in Geckonose's ear woke her up. It was hardly past moonhigh, but Fernshine was prodding her awake. "Hm?..." She yawned. Spottedface was sitting in the clearing, as sleepy as Geckonose was. He'd sat vigil the night before, and Geckonose had expected him to be sleeping like a mole right now.

"Follow me." Fernshine whispered into Geckonose's ear before padding out of the den. Geckonose followed, carefully making sure not to tread over any tails. Puddlefur, Nettlethroat, Violetwing, and Tumblefoot all waited.

Whatever was happening hit Geckonose like a monster from the thunderpath. *They know. They're taking me to Badgerstar. I'm done for!*

"Let's head out. We're wasting moonlight." Nettlethroat rasped. The older warrior led the group, Puddlefur and Tumblefoot brought up the rear, and Violetwing and Fernshine flanked Spottedface and Geckonose.

She cast a glance towards her friend. *What could they want with him?* She wondered. He wasn't apart of the prophecy. He didn't deserve to be hurt!

"Where are we going?" The young warrior finally asked. Geckonose felt a stab of guilt. He was her friend. She should be here to protect him, and yet, she was just as afraid as he was. She felt like an apprentice again, when Mossgrowl had told Sorrelwing and Spottedface that she was half-clan. Sorrelwing still didn't trust her, nor did Mossgrowl. She felt just as hopeless as she did back then.

The scent of ShadowClan, WinClan, and ThunderClan all hit her. Thanks to her powers, she could identify each cat by their scent. Badgerstar was the fist she smelled. And then Whiteflame.

He wouldn't let Badgerstar hurt me! She hoped that was true. Once

the cats came into view, she gasped at just how many cats Badgerstar had collected.

Badgerstar stood in the center of the clearing, his dark brown fur blending with the shadows around him. Only his yellow eyes caught the moonlight, glinting like twin shards of fire. Cats from every Clan surrounded him — WindClan, ThunderClan, even a few ShadowClan warriors. The air was thick with tension and fear.

This isn't just a patrol, Geckonose realized, her stomach tightening. *It's an army.*

Whiteflame stood a tail-length behind his leader, posture stiff, his expression unreadable. Geckonose's heart leapt with hope— but it faltered when he didn't meet her gaze.

"Geckonose. Spottedface." Badgerstar's voice rolled through the clearing like thunder. "You're here." Nettlethroat dipped his head. "As you ordered."

"Good." Badgerstar turned to face Geckonose, his amber eyes narrowing. "I've heard about you. The she-cat who can scent things no other can. It's interesting. And it will make a great addition to BadgerClan." His eyes gleamed Geckonose's paws shifted uneasily. "I only serve my Clan—and StarClan."

"StarClan," Badgerstar spat, his tail lashing once. "They sit in the stars, doing nothing while we suffer. You think they care about us? They've abandoned the forest. It's time someone took control."

A ripple of murmurs spread through the gathered cats. Some nodded, while others stared at the ground. Spottedface took a step forward, fur bristling. "You're talking about destroying everything the Clans stand for!"

Badgerstar's gaze snapped to him. "And what do they stand for now?" he growled. "Starving in leaf-bare? Dying over borders that mean nothing? No. The Clans are broken. I'll make them whole again— under one name."

His eyes glowed with eerie conviction as he looked between them.

"You'll join me. Both of you." Geckonose's breath caught. "Join you? Or what?" Badgerstar's voice dropped, low and dangerous. "Or you'll stand in my way."

Silence fell. Even the wind seemed to stop. Whiteflame's gaze flicked toward her— a small, warning shake of his head. *Don't argue.*

Her chest constricted. She bowed her head slowly, forcing her voice to stay steady. "Then... I'll join you."

Spottedface's fur bristled beside her, every muscle tense, but after a long pause, he followed her lead, lowering his head in reluctant agreement.

Badgerstar's tail swept across the ground like a shadow. "Good," he said, satisfaction rumbling in his chest. "From this night forward, you stand with me. Together, we'll build a stronger forest — one that answers to no cat but me."

A chorus of yowls rose from the gathered warriors— some filled with triumph, others tight with fear.

Geckonose looked up toward the sky. The stars above were hidden behind a veil of cloud. Not one glimmered through. It felt as if StarClan had turned their backs on her completely.

"Well, since all the clans are here, I need to announce something." Badgerstar turned to his cats. Two cats stepped forward, and Geckonose assumed they were both rogues, but Nettlethroat bounded forward to a silvery-gray she-cat. "Echosplash! Where in the name of StarClan have you been? It's been seasons since any cat has seen you!" He gave her a friendly lick over the ear. Badgerstar rolled his eyes at the mention of StarClan.

Violetwing seemed to recognize her, too. "Everycat thought you died! I was devastated! Nightblink became my new mentor, and he was such a pain in the tail!"

Yet another name that Geckonose didn't know. "I had to run." The silver she-cat— Echosplash— answered. "Scarflank had chased me

away." *Scarflank*. Geckonose had heard of him— the ex-deputy of RiverClan.

The other rogue stepped up. "I'm called Juniper. Badgerstar says I'll be staying with ThunderClan." He meowed. Lionclaw, ThunderClan's deputy, bristled. "Thrushstar won't—"

"He will. I've spoken to him already." Badgerstar interrupted, flexing his claws. *He's taken one of his lives! Or at least tried to*. Geckonose realized. *Beaverstar is on his last life. If Badgerstar wants him in on this too...*

She cut her own thoughts off there. She didn't want to think about it. *Oh, StarClan! Please don't let him die to Badgerstar!*

Badgerstar's yellow eyes swept over the gathered cats, cold and sharp as claws scraping stone. "Echosplash will rejoin RiverClan," he declared, his tone leaving no room for argument. "And Juniper will serve ThunderClan—whether Thrushstar likes it or not."

A murmur rippled through the gathered warriors. Some bristled, others exchanged uneasy glances. The air was thick with tension and the scent of fear. Even the night itself seemed to hold its breath.

Lionclaw stepped forward again, his fur fluffed up in defiance. "You can't just—"

"I can." Badgerstar's voice was a low snarl. "And I will. The Clans must be united if we want to survive what's coming."

"What *is* coming?" Geckonose couldn't stop herself from asking, her voice trembling despite her effort to steady it.

Badgerstar's gaze flicked to her, and for a moment, she felt pinned under it like prey. "You'll find out soon enough," he said smoothly. "But for now, you and Spottedface will stay with us. ShadowClan will make sure you... learn your place."

Geckonose's blood turned to ice. Stay with *them*? She glanced desperately at Whiteflame, but his expression was unreadable— caught somewhere between pity and resignation. Spottedface's tail brushed hers lightly, a silent attempt to reassure her, but even he

smelled of fear.

Nettlethroat dipped his head to Badgerstar. "We'll see to it they settle in, and that Beaverstar is aware of where they are."

"Good," Badgerstar growled, then turned away, his dark brown pelt melting into the shadows as he stalked off.

Geckonose's claws dug into the cold ground. Around her, the clans began to disperse, muttering nervously. She couldn't help but notice the look Lionclaw threw over his shoulder—anger, yes, but also something else. Worry.

She leaned closer to Whiteflame and whispered, barely above a breath, "We're trapped." His ear twitched, and he murmured back, "Not forever." But Geckonose wasn't sure she believed her mate.

16.

"All cats with claws sharp enough to fight, gather beneath the Shaderock for a Clan meeting!" Badgerstar yowled. Whiteflame led Geckonose to a spot in the clearing away from the other cats, while Poppystep sat on the other side with Spottedface.

"I have brought two new warriors to strengthen ShadowClan again." He meowed calmly, but yowls soon erupted from the crowd.

"Not more rogues!" Somecat whined. "Don't we have enough bellies to feed on our own?" Another warrior complained, but they sounded more like a disappointed kit.

Badgerstar silenced the cats with a flick of his tail. "The cats I have brought in are not rogues, but warriors formerly of RiverClan. Geckonose, Spottedface, come forward." Badgerstar's gaze landed upon the two RiverClan cats.

Whiteflame's fur bristled as Geckonose stood up, her tail brushing against his flank as she stepped into the center of the clearing. "Do you both swear to pledge loyalty to ShadowClan, and forget your past lives as RiverClan warriors?" Badgerstar's yellow eyes shone like fire.

Spottedface suddenly stood up, his lips curling back into a snarl. "I am loyal to RiverClan only!" He announced, his chest puffing out with pride. Geckonose only nodded her agreement. Badgerstar's grin morphed into a scowl.

Oh, StarClan! Don't let him hurt her! Whiteflame wanted to wail out loud. "Stungface, Squidfur, Poppystep!" Badgerstar hissed to his warriors. *BadgerClan warriors,* Whiteflame realized. "Throw them into the prisoners den." He barked out his order. The three warriors quickly nodded, doing exactly as he told them.

The two RiverClan cats hissed as they were pushed into the prisoners den, but they knew better than to attack. Geckonose met

Whiteflame's guilty gaze.

I'm sorry! He told her through her thoughts. She just nodded her forgiveness to him. "Whiteflame." Badgerstar's booming meow snapped Whiteflame away from his mate. "You will look after our prisoners tonight. For now, you may rest."

Whiteflame dipped his head respectfully. "Yes, Badgerstar." His voice was steady, but his heart pounded like a trapped bird's wings.

As the clan began to disperse, muttering under their breath, Whiteflame could feel the eyes of every cat on him. Some glared with disgust—others with pity. He waited until the clearing began to empty before padding toward the prisoners' den.

Inside, the air was thick with damp moss and anger. Geckonose and Spottedface sat close together, fur brushing. Spottedface's ears were pinned, but Geckonose looked up the moment Whiteflame entered.

"Are you here to gloat, or to guard?" Spottedface spat. Whiteflame winced. "Neither." He glanced at the entrance, then lowered his voice. "I'm sorry. I didn't know this would happen."

Geckonose's expression softened, though her tail-tip twitched. "You knew what he was capable of."

"I did," Whiteflame admitted quietly. "But knowing doesn't mean I can stop him."

Spottedface snorted, but Geckonose's gaze lingered on Whiteflame, unreadable. "You're still one of them now," she whispered, almost like she was trying to convince herself. "You'll have to choose a side soon, Whiteflame. And I hope you choose right."

He didn't answer. He couldn't. *I'm not one of them. I'm not like them!* He couldn't get the words to the tip of his tongue.

Outside, the camp had gone still except for the faint rustle of the night breeze. Whiteflame settled down by the entrance, pretending to keep guard—but his thoughts were a storm.

"I'm not one of them." He finally answered. Geckonose's gaze

softened once more—a purr in her throat as she nuzzled against Whiteflame's nose. "I knew you weren't." She purred. Spottedface looked between them, a look of realization on his face.

"You two are—" He choked on his own meow. "Yes, we're mates." Geckonose admitted, while Whiteflame wrapped a protective tail around her. *I'm here for you.* He glanced between her and Spottedface.

The tortoiseshell tom unsheathed his claws. "How could you? I didn't believe Mossgrowl when he called you a traitor, but how can I believe you now?" His eyes watered. Guilt flashed in Geckonose's eyes, and then anger. "Seriously? You think that all of a sudden, I want to tear RiverClan apart? I'm half-ThunderClan, not ShadowClan! I am loyal to RiverClan.." Geckonose paused.

"But I love Whiteflame. Not even the warrior code— not even StarClan will change that." She held her head high.

Spottedface's claws dug furrows into the dirt, his breath trembling. "You think love excuses betraying your Clan?" he hissed, his voice cracking like ice under paw. "You're sounding like those half-Clan stories kits whisper about in the nursery! The kind that end in blood."

Whiteflame rose to his paws, fur bristling, but Geckonose flicked her tail against his flank—a silent plea to stay calm.

"I didn't choose this," she said firmly, her voice steady despite the sorrow clouding her eyes. "But I won't apologize for it either. RiverClan is my home, and it always will be. But Whiteflame is my heart."

Spottedface stared at her for a long, tense moment, his tail lashing. The defiance in Geckonose's gaze softened something in him, but only for a heartbeat. "If Badgerstar finds out..." he began, then stopped. His voice fell to a whisper. "He'll kill you both."

"I know." Whiteflame's tone was calm, but there was steel in it. "He won't get the chance."

Geckonose pressed closer to him, her nose brushing his chest fur. "We'll make it through this," she murmured, though fear trembled beneath her words.

Spottedface turned away, his shoulders sagging. "You'd better," he muttered. "Because if you don't... RiverClan will lose more than just two warriors."

Outside, the wind whistled through the undergrowth like a warning. And for the first time, Geckonose realized that love might be as dangerous as any battle.

17.

Four sunrises had passed since Juniper had joined ThunderClan and received his warrior name—Juniperfur—but almost no cat welcomed him. Even Thrushstar had seemed reluctant to take him in.

Brightwing didn't seem to trust him—and Skypaw knew that she shouldn't trust him either. *Badgerstar brought him here. No cat can trust him.*

But while Skypaw was sorting herbs, a loud yowl rang throughout the entrance—and then the stench of dogs hit her. "Dogs!" Tangledfur shrieked. Barking and howling came soon after. Two dogs stumbled through the camp on their clumsy paws, tails lashing and forepaws swiping at cats.

Lionclaw and Ashtail sprang at one dogs forelegs, while Dunerunner and Boulderslide raked their claws along it's flank. Flashwhisker distracted the other dog, dashing across its front paws while his sister, Tangledfur, and Acornheart attacked its hind legs. Petalberry protected her kits and Moonleg at the entrance of the nursery, claws unsheathed and her tail lashing.

"Start getting herbs ready!" Brightwing ordered Skypaw, who quickly began making piles of marigold, poppyseed, juniper berries, cobwebs, dock leaves, and anything else she could think of.

Another wail pulled Skypaw's attention to the clearing. A dog was trying to bite at her face, only her forepaws managing to keep it away. *No!* Skypaw wanted to wail, but Juniperfur beat her own voice.

"Over here, mange-pelt!" He yowled, clawing the dogs forepaw. It turned on him, stepping on one of his forelegs. There was a snap, and then a yowl of pain. "Juniperfur!" Twigdance wailed, then ferociously attacked the dog. Juniperfur lay hopelessly on the ground, blood pooling around his leg.

Beetleflight and Beechpaw quickly joined her side, chasing off the dog. The other quickly followed, leaving behind only the injured warriors.

Lionclaw, Juniperfur, and Dunerunner were all badly injured—and many others had minor injuries. Skypaw tended to Twigdance first, who had a bad gash on her shoulder and a torn ear.

As Skypaw was treating her sister, Twigdance's gaze remained on Juniperfur. "He saved me." She whispered, her eyes wide.

Brightwing's ears flicked toward Twigdance's quiet words, her expression unreadable as she pressed cobwebs into Lionclaw's wounds. "He did what any loyal warrior would do," she said curtly, but her tone wasn't harsh—just guarded. Skypaw caught the faint tremor in her mentor's tail, the one that meant she was uneasy.

Twigdance didn't seem to notice. Her eyes stayed fixed on Juniperfur, who lay motionless near the warriors' den, his breathing ragged. Beetleflight and Beechpaw crouched beside him, their pelts pressed close, while Ashtail muttered something to Thrushstar under her breath.

Skypaw swallowed hard, forcing her paws to keep working even though her fur was prickling. She chewed up marigold and pressed it against Twigdance's wound. "He'll be okay," she said softly, though she wasn't sure if she meant Juniperfur or Twigdance.

"I thought he was just some rogue Badgerstar sent to spy on us," Twigdance murmured. "But he didn't even think—he just jumped in front of me." Her voice shook. "He could've died."

Brightwing padded over, her gaze sweeping over both apprentices. "Enough talk," she meowed, though her voice had softened. "Skypaw, finish here, then help me with Juniperfur. Thrushstar wants to know if he'll live through the night."

Skypaw nodded, her stomach tightening. As she looked toward Juniperfur again, she noticed how still he was—how pale his muzzle looked against his dark fur.

And for the first time, she wondered if cats could truly change... or if Juniperfur's courage had been a final act to prove he wasn't the enemy after all.

But Skypaw forced herself to turn around, pressing a poultice of dock leaves to Ashtail's wounds. The old she-cat just grunted, but didn't complain.

A little while later, most of the cats were out of the medicine den—but many were relieved of their warrior duties for at least a day. Juniperfur, Lionclaw, Dunerunner, Beechpaw, Ashtail, and Twigdance all stayed in the medicine den. It felt crowded and stuffy with so many cats in the den, but Skypaw didn't dare complain. She and Brightwing had gone out on a walk while the injured cats slept, leaving Vinepool, who had some knowledge on herbs, to watch over them.

Eventually, they reached the border that led into RiverClan territory. "Come on, Skypaw. We must go to the moonpool." She meowed, beckoning with her tail. Skypaw's eyes stretched wide.

"What? Why now? Why both of us?" She couldn't help the questions from tumbling out. Brightwing didn't answer. They both traveled to the moonpool. Despite how bone-weary Skypaw felt, she forced herself to keep going.

"Skypaw, I've done something no medicine cat should have." Brightwing finally meowed as they sat next to the pool of water. "I'm having Charcoalbark's kits."

Skypaw's eyes stretched wider, her sleepiness suddenly forgotten. "But you're a medicine cat!" She couldn't suppress her wail. "But I cannot be any longer. Not if Thrushstar knows where these kits came from. So it is time for you to receive your medicine cat name."

Brightwing looked solemnly at her paws, then at the stars. "Skypaw, is it your wish to become a medicine cat?" She asked. "It is." Skypaw's voice trembled. *I should feel proud.* She told herself, but she couldn't find it within herself to be happy. Not when Brightwing was in danger.

"Then by the power of StarClan, I name you Skywhisper. I hope that StarClan shall look down upon you, and light your path as a medicine cat." Brightwing meowed, her eyes shining with a mixture of pride and sadness.

The Moonpool shimmered faintly, and Skywhisper felt the faintest warmth ripple through her fur—a sign from StarClan. But even as she pressed her nose to the water, she couldn't shake the ache in her chest. Brightwing was giving her everything... but losing everything in return.

StarClan, don't let her be caught! Skywhisper begged silently, wishing that her prayers wouldn't go unanswered.

18.

The full moon loomed over the forest, illuminating the camp as Pollengleam called for the cats who would be going to the gathering. But Branchstar called a meeting. "May all cats fast enough to catch prey on the moor gather beneath the Tallrock for a Clan meeting!"

Brackenpaw knew very well what this was about—his naming ceremony! Branchstar had been to busy earlier to give him his name.

"Earlier, Brackenpaw finished his warrior assessment, and he has passed. Brackenpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code, and defend WindClan, even at the cost of your life?" Branchstar asked. "I do." Brackenpaw replied calmly, though his fur pricked with excitement.

"Then from this moment forward, you shall be known as Brackenjaw. StarClan honors your strength and agility." Cheers soon erupted, and Pollengleam beckoned for Brackenjaw to join the gathered warriors who would go to the gathering.

RiverClan, ShadowClan, and ThunderClan were already there. The leaders gathered on top of the Great Oak, and the gathering began.

Beaverstar stepped up first. "Prey has been running well in RiverClan ever since newleaf started." He began. Badgerstar snorted, "Prey always runs well in RiverClan."

The RiverClan warriors bristled, but Beaverstar didn't react. "We have one new warrior, Sorrelwing." He dipped his head to the brown she-cat. "Sorrelwing! Sorrelwing!" All four clans cheered.

Branchstar is going to announce my new name, too. Brackenjaw thought, nervous at the idea of all four Clan's eyes on him. But he focused on Thrushstar, who stepped forwards next. "We have three new warriors, Twigdance, Beetleflight, and Beechbranch." The three

young warriors puffed their chests out proudly.

"Where's Twigdance?" Somecat called out. "Twigdance was injured. "Two dogs attacked our camp two sunrises ago. But no cat died, and ThunderClan is still strong." Thrushstar was sure to add.

Branchstar was next. "Prey is well in WindClan, and we have a new warrior as well— Brackenjaw." Suddenly, all eyes were on him. His Clanmates, and some other cats cheered too. The loudest was Skywhisper, who caught his eye. He smiled, puffing out his chest fur.

"We have three new warriors to welcome to ShadowClan!" Badgerstar's voice rose above the cheering cats, "Mottledtail, Honeyshine, and Flamestep."

The clearing erupted once more in cheers. But beneath the surface hum of celebration, Brackenjaw couldn't shake the feeling that something darker lingered between the Clans—like the still air before a storm.

Beaverstar's tail flicked as Badgerstar's voice faded. "You seem to have plenty of new warriors, Badgerstar," he said evenly. "Though I notice two of my *own* warriors have gone missing. Care to explain why that is?"

Badgerstar's yellow eyes glimmered in the moonlight. "You mean Geckonose and Spottedface? They've... joined ShadowClan."

Gasps rippled through the clearing. RiverClan cats bristled instantly, and even some ThunderClan and WindClan warriors muttered in disbelief.

"They *what?*" Beaverstar's calm broke, his voice rising like the tide. "You *stole* my warriors!" Badgerstar stood, his thick fur rippling. "They came willingly. They chose a stronger Clan."

"That's a lie!" A RiverClan warrior yowled from below the Great Rock. "They'd never betray their Clan!"

Beaverstar's claws scraped against the stone. "You've gone too far, Badgerstar. You have no right to keep cats from another Clan.

Return them, or you'll face the claws of RiverClan!"

"Threats?" Badgerstar snarled, stepping forward. "You've grown soft, Beaverstar. You'd waste lives on two cats who turned their backs on you?"

"They didn't *turn their backs!*" Beaverstar hissed. His tail lashed furiously, silver fur bristling along his spine. "I know my warriors, and I know they'd rather drown than join you."

Murmurs rose among the gathered cats—some in agreement, others in fear. Thrushstar rose his tail to calm them. "Enough! The warrior code forbids fighting at the Gathering!"

Badgerstar's lip curled. "The code means nothing when StarClan itself favors me." His scowl turned into a grin. A shiver ran through the assembled cats. Even the moonlight seemed to flicker for a heartbeat, clouds whispering across its surface.

Beaverstar's voice dropped to a growl. "You're treading on dangerous ground, Badgerstar. StarClan does not favor thieves."

"Believe what you want," Badgerstar snarled back, his gaze burning like flame. "But Geckonose and Spottedface are *ShadowClan* now. Cross the border, and it'll be the last thing your warriors ever do."

Gasps echoed. The Gathering had never felt colder. Branchstar stepped forward, fur bristling. "Badgerstar, you shame all four Clans with this talk! You're breaking the truce!"

"Then let it break," Badgerstar growled, his voice low and dangerous. "Let every cat here remember who the strongest Clan truly is."

"This gathering is over!" Thrushstar yelled from on top of the Great Oak, before the leaders all leapt down and began gathering their own clans together. But Brackenjaw raced over to Whiteflame. *He's a prophecy cat too. I can trust him.*

"Is it true?" Brackenjaw wanted to wail. Whiteflame could only nod, his ears pinning. "I don't like it either. But I can't do anything about it." He muttered angrily.

"Why not?!" Brackenjaw felt a surge of anger. "Badgerstar is my Clan leader, and my father." Whiteflame didn't look proud to have Badgerstar as a father. *Who would?* "He only has one life." Brackenjaw whispered, his voice low. "So do I." Whiteflame narrowed his eyes.

So does every cat! The words didn't leave the tip of Brackenjaw's tongue—because deep down, he knew Whiteflame was right to not risk his life.

"Whiteflame!" Badgerstar called, yellow eyes glaring at Brackenjaw. "Brackenjaw, hurry up, slow mole!" Foxblaze called from the other end of the clearing. Whiteflame gave a small, silent nod—half farewell, half apology—then bounded off after his Clan.

Brackenjaw watched him go, a cold weight settling in his chest before turning to his own Clan.

19.

Geckonose was asleep in the prisoners den, still refusing to pledge loyalty to ShadowClan, and become a member. Badgerstar would only give her and Spottedface one stale mouse to share everyday, but Whiteflame would manage to pass them some extra prey whenever he could. Spottedface was slowly starting to approve of the two being mates, despite coming from different Clans.

She woke up to a rustling coming from the nursery. Saturn emerged with one of her kits, Stormkit, in her jaws. She was sound asleep, snoring while her mother carried her into Badgerstar's den.

Curiosity got the better of Geckonose, and she snuck towards the leaders den beneath the Shaderock. She knew better than to get too close—after all, she still smelled of RiverClan. She hid in one of the bushes next to the den entrance, perking her ears.

"Stormkit shall be the future leader of ShadowClan." Badgerstar whispered, and Geckonose could practically *hear* the gleam in his eyes. "I will train her myself, and when she is ready, she will be made a warrior. She'll be given an apprentice as soon as possible, and then I'll kill Redfang."

Geckonose felt a chill run through her pelt. Immediately, she darted back to the prisoners den. She sniffed the air, picking out Badgerstar's scent to continue listening.

"Geckonose and Spottedface will be dead tomorrow if they do not pledge loyalty." He decided, claws unsheathing. Saturn simply nodded. "I'll bring Stormkit back to the nursery now." She mewed before picking up her kit again.

Geckonose's heart hammered so hard she thought it might burst. *He'll kill us tomorrow,* Badgerstar had said. The words wound through her like an icesting.

She padded back to the prisoners' den on legs that felt leaden.

Spottedface sat awake, jaw clenched, as if he had been waiting. Moonlight pooled across his fur. The air tasted of fear and old moss.

"Badgerstar's going to kill us," she hissed the moment she was close enough. Spottedface's eyes went hard. "What did you hear?" he demanded.

Geckonose told him everything — Stormkit's name, Badgerstar's quiet promise to train her, the way Saturn had only nodded. When she finished, Spottedface dug his claws into the moss until it whispered.

"We won't pledge," he snarled. "Not to him." *He's as stubborn as a badger!*

"We can't fight him here," Geckonose said, shaking. "Not tonight. Not in front of all those cats. If he wants to make an example of us, we'll be buried under ten times that fury."

They stared at one another in the cold quiet, the world narrowing to the small space between their breaths. Despair pressed at Geckonose like a heavy paw—then the den mouth shifted and Whiteflame slipped in, setting down a scrap of prey he'd risked stealing.

"You shouldn't be out," Spottedface said, but it wasn't a question. Whiteflame sank beside them, eyes shadowed. "I heard," he said. "I couldn't sleep." He gave a slow, bitter twist of a smile. "He's planning. He thinks he's already won."

Geckonose looked between them, feeling smaller than a vole. "What do we do? Run? Fight?"

Whiteflame's tail curled protectively around both of them. "No." His voice was flat but steady. "We don't run. We don't make his life easier by fleeing. We stay. We pretend. I'll tell him you pledged. I'll keep watch. We'll learn what he plans, and we'll hold on until a better chance comes." Spottedface barked a sharp laugh that was more pain than humor. "You'd lie for us?"

"If lying keeps you breathing, I'll lie until my throat breaks,"

Whiteflame said. "And when he slips up—when he shows the crack in himself—we take it. We don't run away from our home. We wait until it's safe to leave. Or until it's safe to change it."

They sat in the den with a quiet plan that felt brittle and brave. Outside, Badgerstar breathed in his sleep, unaware he'd sharpened his own undoing by showing his paw. Geckonose closed her eyes, folding the decision inside her.

The next morning, Badgerstar dragged Geckonose and Spottedface out of the prisoners den. "I'm giving you two one last chance." He hissed, pacing around them. "Will you pledge loyalty to ShadowClan?" It wasn't a question.

Geckonose's belly grumbled. She and Spottedface were both thin and underfed. *Maybe he'll give us some more prey now.* "I do." She choked out. Spottedface's lips curled back into a snarl, but he muttered the same words. "I do..."

Satisfaction shone in Badgerstar's eyes. "Help yourselves to the fresh-kill pile and rest. Tomorrow you'll be put on patrols." He meowed before padding towards the nursery.

Geckonose couldn't help herself—she rushed towards the fresh-kill pile and pulled out a fish. Spottedface grabbed a vole, quickly devouring a few mouthfuls. Geckonose bit into the fish, gulping down mouthfuls hungrily. *It doesn't taste different from a RiverClan fish at all!* She realized, but she would've ate it either way.

Once she was done, she sat up to clean her whiskers off. "I thought ShadowClan prey would taste differently." Spottedface meowed, licking his lips. "So did I." Geckonose admitted, purring with satisfaction now that she had a full belly.

Maybe ShadowClan won't be so bad. She thought, but didn't dare say. She'd probably claw her own throat out if she did.

Whiteflame padded over, his tail flicking as he watched them eat. His gaze lingered on Geckonose a moment too long before he looked away. "You said it," he murmured lowly, his tone unreadable. "Badgerstar's convinced you've joined."

Spottedface gave a bitter snort. "We said what he wanted to hear. That's all."

"Keep it that way," Whiteflame warned softly, glancing toward the nursery where Badgerstar's tail disappeared inside. "He's restless. He doesn't trust easily—not even me."

Geckonose swallowed the last bite of her fish and wiped her mouth with a paw. "He's not as clever as he thinks," she muttered. "He's already told me too much."

Whiteflame's ears twitched. "You overheard him?" She nodded faintly. "He's planning something with Saturn's kit. Stormkit. Says she'll be the future leader of ShadowClan. Said he'd kill Redfang."

Whiteflame's eyes widened, the fur along his spine bristling. "Stormkit?" he whispered. "He—" His voice broke, then steadied. "Then we have less time than I thought."

Spottedface stood, shaking out his fur. "So what now? Pretend to be loyal warriors until he croaks?"

Whiteflame's gaze flicked between them. "Until there's a chance to stop him." He looked pointedly at Geckonose. "Keep your heads down. Don't challenge him. If he sees you working hard, he'll turn his attention elsewhere."

Spottedface growled under his breath but didn't argue. "Fine. But if he lays a claw on Geckonose again, I'll tear his muzzle off."

Whiteflame's whiskers twitched — half amusement, half warning. "Then you'll die before sunrise. Don't give him a reason."

As he padded away, Geckonose watched him go, her chest aching in ways she couldn't explain. Spottedface noticed, of course; he always did. "He's trouble," he muttered. "So am I," she murmured back, curling her tail around her paws.

And as she looked around the ShadowClan camp—the dark pines, the glimmer of cold water in the marshes—she couldn't tell whether she felt trapped or chosen by something greater.

20.

Whiteflame, Geckonose, Rainsight, and Frostflower had gone out on a hunting patrol—and it wasn't too long before Rainsight and Frostflower had disappeared together.

I *wish that I could go off with Geckonose like that.* Whiteflame thought crossly, *but everycat would be suspicious of us if we did.*

"Can you smell anything?" He asked, brushing his flank against hers. She sniffed the air, then shook her head. "I can't smell anything through the pines!" She complained helplessly. "It's as if I don't even have my powers..."

Whiteflame frowned, but he understood. "I guess you're just used to RiverClan's scent more." He mewed thoughtfully. Geckonose nodded. "I can hardly believe that ShadowClan's territory is in the same territory as RiverClan's." She joked softly, a purr rumbling in her throat. Whiteflame let out a *mrrow* of laughter.

For once, he thought he could just be at peace with the cat he loved —but his happiness didn't last long.

Rowanleaf burst through the bushes, a shrew scurrying past her. On instinct, Geckonose lunged forwards and caught it in her jaws, and it quickly fell limp. Whiteflame purred, impressed by her quick moves. "That was great, Geckonose!" He praised, running his tail along her spine.

"I could've caught it on my own." Rowanleaf huffed, her claws flexing into the ground. Her eyes narrowed, full of jealousy as she glared at Geckonose.

"Any cat could've caught it." Geckonose meowed, noticing the hostility from the other she-cat. "I just thought it'd be quicker if I helped." She placed the shrew in front of Rowanleaf's paws. "Teamwork is a vital part of hunting." Whiteflame pointed out, but Rowanleaf didn't let it go.

She turned on Whiteflame, her claws unsheathed. "How could you? She's not even from ShadowClan!" She spat. "You aren't either." Whiteflame pointed out, his chest fur fluffing out. Rowanleaf had formerly been a loner, everycat knew that. *But she is ShadowClan through-and-through.* Whiteflame felt a surge of guilt.

"ShadowClan took me in," Rowanleaf hissed, tail lashing. "I earned my place. She hasn't!" Geckonose rose to her paws, hackles bristling. "I never said I was better than you," she snapped. "I'm just trying to *help!*"

"By making me look mouse–brained in front of the others?" Rowanleaf shot back, eyes flashing. "Don't think we haven't noticed how close you and Whiteflame are. Maybe you're just trying to claw your way into ShadowClan through *him*."

Whiteflame froze, blood roaring in his ears. "That's enough, Rowanleaf." He growled. "Oh, did I strike a nerve?" She sneered, "Maybe Badgerstar should hear about how cozy you've gotten with our prisoner."

Geckonose's heart skipped a beat. "You wouldn't—" Rowanleaf smiled thinly. "Try me."

The forest fell quiet, broken only by the far-off croak of a frog and the rustling of wind through the pines. Whiteflame stepped between them, his fur brushing both their shoulders. "If you say a word to Badgerstar, I'll tell him you nearly let prey escape right under your nose."

Rowanleaf's glare faltered, her ears flattening. "You wouldn't dare!" She hissed. "Try *me*," Whiteflame growled, echoing her words.

For a long, breathless moment, no cat moved. Then Rowanleaf gave a furious snort and stalked away into the undergrowth, tail whipping behind her. Geckonose let out a shaky sigh. "She'll hate me forever now."

Whiteflame's voice softened. "Let her. She's not the one who caught the prey." He bent to pick up the shrew and brushed against her as he passed. "Come on. We should get back before she starts

spreading rumors."

As they padded through the pines, Geckonose couldn't shake the uneasy feeling curling in her chest. Even if Rowanleaf didn't tell Badgerstar today... it was only a matter of time before some cat did. And when that happened, not even Whiteflame's loyalty could save her.

When they got back to camp, there was no sign of Rowanleaf anywhere. Spikejaw and Mouse were sharing tongues together, while Redfang and his mate, Dawntuft, shared a vole. Poppystep was sunning outside of the warrior's den, while Sunnypool and Honeyshine played with Marshkit and Thornkit, while Graykit, Larkkit, and Starlingkit played hide the pinecone. Stormkit and Larkkit were running around the clearing playing mouse-and-warrior.

"You've sure got lots of kits in your camp!" Geckonose's spirits seemed to brighten as she looked fondly at the young cats. *I wonder if she'd ever want to have kits with me.* Every hair on Whiteflame's pelt felt hot at the thought.

"Saturn's kits are nearly four moons old." Whiteflame glanced at the tiny kits. "Badgerstar made Mottledtail, Flamestep, and Honeyshine apprentices at four moons." He murmured.

Geckonose's fur bristled. "Four moons? Surely they were too small!" She looked over at them. *They're still too small.* Whiteflame thought.

The three young warriors were only ten moons old. *They should still be apprentices*. Whiteflame couldn't help but stare at them as well. Honeyshine and Mottledtail were tossing around a moss ball, while Flamestep was trying to catch it from in between them.

Geckonose's ears angled back. "At four moons, I was still tripping over my own tail. Kits that young can't even fight properly."

"Badgerstar doesn't care," Whiteflame muttered, his gaze drifting toward the leader's den. "He thinks strength comes from numbers, not from training."

Geckonose followed his gaze, her tail twitching uneasily. "That's not strength. That's desperation."

Before Whiteflame could answer, Mudstrike padded past, carrying fresh bedding toward the nursery. His eyes lingered on the two of them— not with anger this time, but with quiet warning. Geckonose dipped her head, pretending to help fold the moss near her paws.

"Where's Rowanleaf?" He asked suddenly, his tone cautious. "Don't know," Whiteflame replied smoothly. "She went off hunting after we caught a shrew."

Mudstrike frowned, his tail flicking. "Let's hope she's just hunting, then." Whiteflame's muscles tensed. "What do you mean?"

The older warrior gave him a sharp look. "She's been talking a lot lately— about cats who don't belong here. You'd do well to keep your head down, Whiteflame. And you—" he turned to Geckonose, "—you've got enough eyes on you already."

He padded off before either of them could respond. Geckonose exhaled slowly. "So it's not just Rowanleaf who's watching me."

Whiteflame brushed his tail over her flank, his voice low. "Let them watch. They'll see you're loyal soon enough." She looked at him, her green eyes soft but weary. "And if they don't?"

Whiteflame hesitated, glancing toward the leader's den where Badgerstar's shadow moved against the stone. "Then I'll make them."

21.

Skywhisper curled up in her nest, hoping to get a peaceful sleep. When she opened her eyes, she quickly realized that she wasn't in her nest anymore— but in WindClan's camp. *I must be dreaming still.* She thought.

A flame-colored tabby pelt flashed before her. *Adderblaze!* She thought with a surge of joy. The StarClan tom appeared in front of her, standing near the warriors' den. Brackenjaw emerged, phasing through him. *We're not really here.*

"Why have you brought me here?" Skywhisper finally asked. "Brackenjaw has yet to discover his power." Adderblaze meowed.

The StarClan tom dipped his head. "You've come far, Skywhisper," he said, his tone steady but grave. "But your path—and Brackenjaw's—has only begun."

Brackenjaw appeared beside her, his eyes wide with confusion. "Why are we here? What does this mean?"

Adderblaze's gaze darkened. "The prophecy you both share still moves through the forest, even if you do not yet see it. Threads are tightening—Badgerstar's darkness spreads beyond ShadowClan. When one cat falls, another will rise in their place. You must be ready."

Skywhisper's pelt prickled. "Ready for what?" She asked. "For loss," Adderblaze said quietly. "For choice. And for what you'll have to become to save them."

The stars in his fur began to flicker out, the dream dissolving into mist. "Adderblaze, wait—what are we supposed to do?" Skywhisper called.

His voice echoed faintly as he faded away: "*The prophecy is not yet*

fulfilled. Remember that."

Skywhisper woke in her nest with a jolt, her chest heaving. The scent of herbs filled her nose—but all she could think about was Adderblaze's warning.

Brackenjaw needs to find out what his power is, now! Skywhisper thought. Her gaze carried over to Juniperfur and Twigdance, the only two cats to remain in the medicine den. Juniperfur was twitching in his sleep before he jolted awake, as if he had a bad dream.

His blue gaze landed on Skywhisper first, wide and afraid. "Skywhisper!" He meowed, sounding relieved. He got out of his nest and limped over to her, his back leg still broken. Skywhisper felt terrible, but Brightwing said she wasn't allowed to heal it. *It'd be too suspicious.*

"Skywhisper! Oh, thank goodness you're here!" He made no effort to keep his voice down. Skywhisper put a paw over his mouth to shush him. "Quiet!" She hissed, "Unless you want to wake these two up." She gestured to Brightwing and Twigdance, who were fast asleep.

Brightwing will be angrier than a fox in a fit if he wakes her! Skywhisper thought. "Sorry. But I need to tell you something." Juniperfur whispered—the look in his eyes telling Skywhisper that it was urgent. She nodded, padding towards the den entrance.

"Come on, then." She whispered, beckoning for him to follow.

The two cats slipped out into the night, the camp silent except for the faint rustling of leaves and the distant chirp of crickets. Moonlight dappled Juniperfur's blue-gray pelt as he sank down beside the bramble wall, his tail twitching with unease.

Skywhisper sat across from him, her whiskers twitching. "What's going on?" she asked quietly.

Juniperfur's gaze darted toward the leader's den before he spoke, his voice trembling. "I saw it again," he whispered. "The battle. The same one I dreamed of before Badgerstar brought me here. Only

this time, I saw *everything*."

Skywhisper's fur prickled. "Everything?" He nodded. "He's planning it, Skywhisper. Badgerstar—he's not just after RiverClan anymore. He wants all the Clans. He wants the whole forest." His claws dug into the dirt. "I saw blood everywhere. Cats fighting each other like prey-crazed foxes. And Badgerstar stood above it all—laughing."

Skywhisper's breath caught. "You're sure it wasn't just a dream?" Juniperfur's eyes glowed faintly in the moonlight, the fear in them unmistakable. "No. It was a vision. I think StarClan wanted me to see it." His voice broke. "I can't stay on his side, Skywhisper. I can't be part of this anymore."

For a heartbeat, neither cat spoke. Skywhisper felt her heart pounding against her ribs. Finally, she leaned closer, lowering her voice. "Then don't be," she murmured. "You can still do the right thing. Maybe—maybe this is your chance to make it right."

Juniperfur's tail flicked uncertainly. "If I turn on him, he'll kill me."

"Then you'll need to choose carefully when you do it." Skywhisper's tone softened. "But you're not alone, Juniperfur. You saw what StarClan wanted you to see for a reason."

He swallowed hard, meeting her gaze. "Then I'll do it. I'll help stop him." Skywhisper nodded solemnly, though her heart raced. She didn't know what was coming—but she knew that everything was about to change.

If these rogues can choose where their heart lies, with a Clan or with Badgerstar, then maybe the cats he's collected will too. Skywhisper could only home that it was true.

"One more thing," Juniperfur's blue gaze rose to meet Skywhisper's once again. His fur suddenly bristled with embarrassment, and he glanced away again. "I think I love Twigdance." He meowed bashfully.

Skywhisper blinked, caught off guard. Of all the things she'd expected him to say, *that* wasn't one of them.

Juniperfur shuffled his paws, his ears flattening. "I know it's stupid," he muttered. "I barely even know her, but—she's kind. And brave. And after what happened with the dogs... I just can't stop thinking about her."

Skywhisper's expression softened, her earlier tension melting into something fonder. "That's not stupid," she said quietly. "StarClan knows the heart doesn't always listen to the code."

Juniperfur let out a shaky laugh, though his eyes still gleamed with worry. "If she knew who I really was—where I came from—she'd never look at me the same."

"Maybe," Skywhisper admitted. "But maybe she would. Twigdance isn't the kind of cat who judges easily."

Juniperfur gave a small, hopeful nod. "You really think so?" He asked. "I know so. She's my sister, after all." Skywhisper brushed her tail gently along his shoulder. "You've already chosen where your heart lies—both with her, and with what's right. StarClan must see that."

Juniperfur's ears twitched, and for the first time since she'd found him, Skywhisper saw a faint spark of peace in his gaze.

22.

Patrols had been dismissed, and Brackenjaw was just about the only warrior left in the camp. Rosekit, Alderkit, and Gustkit were playing with each other outside of the nursery. Coralclaw watched them, a motherly fondness in her eyes. Scarstrike groomed himself just outside of the warriors den, and the medicine cats sorted their herbs, while Raspycloud and Hawkjaw were sunning outside of the elders' den.

Brackenjaw sighed, slipping through the brambles that guarded the WindClan camp's entrance. *The border patrols aren't going to RiverClan today.* He thought. He'd hunt near there—and hopefully not run into any RiverClan or other WindClan cats.

As he stalked a rabbit, he couldn't help but think about his powers —or well, lack thereof. *Maybe StarClan was wrong about me. Maybe I don't really have powers.*

It was the first time he'd ever doubted it. The rabbit was now just about to cross into RiverClan. Brackenjaw leapt for it, quickly catching it as a RiverClan patrol approached. "Hey!" A gray tabby she-cat—Fernshine— snapped. "What are you doing so close to the border?"

"He's stealing prey, fish-brain!" A light brown tom—Mossgrowl— stepped forwards next. His green eyes pierced through Brackenjaw's pelt.

"Since when does RiverClan hunt rabbits?" Brackenjaw hissed, his hackles raising. "This is *WindClan* prey."

Another she-cat, a light brown one—Spottedwing, stepped up. "RiverClan has more mouths to feed than WindClan." She pointed out, then her tail flicked to the border. "And the rabbit was on the border, so it should be RiverClan's."

A golden tom named Tumblefoot stepped forwards next, claws

already unsheathed. "You're way outnumbered, rabbit-chaser. Give over the prey and we can settle this peacefully." He growled.

He's right. I can't win against four warriors! Brackenjaw's claws unsheathed, and he dropped the rabbit on WindClan's side of the border. *No. I won't let them win!*

He dropped into a crouch, fur bristling. "I said it's WindClan prey," he hissed through clenched teeth. Tumblefoot lashed his tail, stepping closer. "Then you'll have to fight for it."

Brackenjaw's heart pounded. His mind screamed at him to run—he was alone, outnumbered four to one. But something deep within him... *shifted.* The air seemed to thrum around him, as if the moor's wind itself had found its way into his veins.

Tumblefoot lunged first, claws flashing. Brackenjaw ducked aside and slammed his shoulder into the tom's chest. The impact sent the RiverClan warrior flying back several fox-lengths, crashing into Fernshine with a startled yowl.

"What—?" Brackenjaw froze, staring at his own paws. That shove had felt *too* easy. He'd hardly even tried.

Mossgrowl recovered first, spitting furiously. "You little—!" He lunged, claws slicing through the air. Brackenjaw twisted, grabbing the tom by the scruff and hurling him to the ground. Spottedwing tried to jump him from behind—but Brackenjaw kicked out with his hind legs, sending her tumbling like a leaf in a storm.

The forest went silent except for Brackenjaw's heaving breath. His claws were unsheathed, the rabbit still lying at his paws. Four RiverClan cats stared at him, wide-eyed. "What in StarClan's name are you?" Fernshine whispered, backing away.

Brackenjaw's gaze flicked from her to his trembling paws. They didn't even *hurt* from the blows he'd landed. The strength still buzzed through him, hot and alive like fire in his veins.

"I—I don't know." He panted. Mossgrowl growled lowly, his pride wounded but his eyes cautious. "You'd better pray that strength

wasn't just a one-time thing. We'll be back, WindClan furball."

"No!" Sorrelwing's claws unsheathed. "He can't get away with this!" She lunged at him, aiming for his neck. Brackenjaw dodged, her paws landing on his tail. She snarled and bit down into it, causing him to let out a yowl.

He twisted to rake his claws along her flank. Sorrelwing let out a hiss in response, biting into his shoulder. Brackenjaw pushed her to the ground and attempted to pounce on her, but landed on her leg. There was a loud yowl from the she-cat, and blood sprayed across Brackenjaw's face.

Fernshine dragged Sorrelwing to the RiverClan side of the border. "You mouse-brain!" She spat at Sorrelwing.

The RiverClan patrol retreated into the reeds, dragging their injured clanmates with them.

Brackenjaw stood alone at the border, chest rising and falling. He looked down at the rabbit, then back toward the WindClan moor. "Guess StarClan didn't make a mistake after all."

Strength still coursed through his muscles as he carried the rabbit back to camp. He dropped it off in the fresh-kill pile, and then limped into the medicine den. Morningfur and Thornwhisker both looked at him with wide eyes, as if he'd turned into a two-headed badger. "

"I had a run-in with some RiverClan cats." He explained with a wince. "Well go ahead and lay down. I'll take care of you. Thornwhisker, perhaps you should go out and get some more cobwebs. We're already running low." Morningfur meowed kindly. Thornwhisker just grumbled and then left the den.

Brackenjaw lay down heavily in one of the nests, his shoulder throbbing where Sorrelwing's teeth had sunk in. Morningfur began dabbing moss soaked with water along the wound, her movements brisk but careful.

"You're lucky whoever attacked you didn't tear your shoulder

apart," she murmured. "What happened out there?"

Brackenjaw hesitated. "Four RiverClan warriors said the rabbit was on the border. I told them it was WindClan's. Then they attacked."

Morningfur's ears flicked, but she didn't look up. "And you fought four of them off?"

He swallowed, glancing down at his paws. "I didn't mean to hurt them that bad. I just... reacted. It's like something took over."

At that, Morningfur finally raised her gaze. Her amber eyes studied him carefully, as if trying to see what lay beneath his fur. "StarClan's power," she murmured under her breath.

"What?" He asked. "Nothing." She shook her head quickly. "You should rest. I'll tell Thrushstar what happened."

Brackenjaw started to protest, but his body was already too heavy. The adrenaline was fading, leaving only the ache of wounds and the echo of strength still humming faintly under his skin.

As Morningfur padded out of the den, he closed his eyes. *StarClan didn't make a mistake after all... But what if I just proved I'm more of a danger than a blessing?*

Outside, Thornwhisker returned with a wad of cobwebs, muttering about foolish young warriors and border fights. Morningfur's voice, low but urgent, drifted faintly from outside the den as she called for Thrushstar.

Brackenjaw's ears flicked. He had a feeling this wouldn't stay quiet for long.

23.

Tonight was the quarter moon—the nights that BadgerClan would meet at the edge of ShadowClan territory. The only meetings that Whiteflame hated going to. Geckonose and Spottedface had been forced along this time.

When they got to the meeting spot, most of the other cats were there. Flashwhisker, Spottedfall, and Stormpelt were the only ThunderClan cats who had made it.

Badgerstar leapt on top of a rock—a makeshift Clan rock. "BadgerClan!" He called, silencing all of the cats. "We are to attack the Clans soon, to claim the forest as ours! And when that time comes, I will need a deputy by my side." His yellow gaze swept along the cats.

"Fernshine." He finally meowed, his gaze landing on the gray she-cat. "You have shown unwavering loyalty to me, and have been apart of BadgerClan since the beginning. You have brought many capable warriors, and have proven yourself to be strong. For these reasons, I choose you as the deputy of BadgerClan."

A murmur rippled through the crowd—some cats yowled Fernshine's name in support, while others exchanged uneasy glances.

Fernshine dipped her head low. "Thank you, Badgerstar. I'll serve you and BadgerClan with my life." Her voice was steady, but her tail flicked once—nervous, restrained.

Whiteflame's pelt bristled. *Fernshine?* She had been RiverClan through and through before joining. Loyal, yes—but to *him*? He glanced sideways at Geckonose, who was staring at Fernshine with disbelief.

"Fernshine?" Spottedface whispered under his breath. "He's lost it."

Geckonose shot him a warning glance, but her fur stayed puffed. "Quiet," she hissed softly. "You'll get us all in trouble."

Badgerstar's gaze swept over the crowd again, his tail raised high. "The other Clans are weak," he continued, voice echoing through the pine trees. "They fight amongst themselves while we grow stronger. When the full moon rises again, we will strike. The forest will finally be united—under one Clan!"

A few cats yowled in approval, but the sound was thin, forced. Whiteflame could feel Geckonose trembling beside him. "We can't keep following him," she whispered. "He's going to get us all killed."

"I know," Whiteflame murmured, his claws sinking into the earth. "But if we leave now... he'll make sure we don't get far."

Fernshine had moved closer to Badgerstar's side now, standing below him like a shadow. Her eyes flickered toward the crowd—hesitant, almost guilty.

Whiteflame caught that look and felt something twist in his chest. Maybe not every cat standing under Badgerstar's command truly believed in him. Maybe some were just too afraid to walk away.

And that, he realized, was what made Badgerstar truly dangerous. *But I'm not scared of him,* Whiteflame thought, determination running through his pelt. *Because I know the truth. I know he only has one life.*

Flashwhisker's eyes gleamed, along with a few other cats. *Some cats do believe in him.* Whiteflame thought, flexing his claws. Geckonose pulled back her lip, snarling at her half-brother as Spottedfall, her mother, sat next to him. Whiteflame put his tail-tip on her shoulder.

"Clan dismissed." Badgerstar dipped his head, leaping off the rock and bringing ShadowClan back home. Fernshine gathered RiverClan, and Branchstar gathered WindClan. Whiteflame and Geckonose walked back to camp side-by-side, their flanks pressed together.

It's nice, being able to be openly seen next to her. Whiteflame thought, his fur feeling hot. He couldn't openly announce his relationship with her, but he could at least talk to her in public now.

Geckonose brushed her tail against his as they padded through the pines. "Do you think he meant it?" she asked softly. "About attacking the Clans?"

Whiteflame hesitated. "I think Badgerstar means every word that comes out of his mouth," he said grimly. "But that doesn't mean he'll win."

She didn't reply, but her gaze lingered on the forest floor, deep in thought. When they stepped through the bramble tunnel into camp, the air felt heavier—as though the shadows themselves were listening.

Geckonose pressed close to him again, her voice a whisper. "If there's going to be a battle... we'll have to choose a side."

Whiteflame glanced toward the leader's den, then down at her. "We already have. You know that. Don't forget the prophecy. We were born to take him down. And we will." He reassured his mate.

Geckonose leaned into him, letting his warmth steady the tremor in her paws. "I'm not afraid—if you're with me." Her voice was small, fierce. For a second the world narrowed to the two of them: pines whispering, the distant drip of water, and their breaths steaming in the cold.

"We'll be careful," Whiteflame promised. "We won't rush. We'll learn his plans, find his weakness, and wait for the right moment." He pressed his muzzle to hers, a quick, desperate nuzzle that tasted of river-mud and stolen prey. "I'll pass you what I overhear. You'll tell me anything you pick up with your nose. We'll weave it together."

Geckonose nodded. "And if it comes to fighting—" she began.

"—we'll do it together," Whiteflame finished. His blue eyes were steady, lit with the same stubborn fire that had gotten them both this far. "For StarClan. For RiverClan. For everyone he's hurt."

They slipped into the shadow of the den, close enough for confidence but careful not to draw attention. Behind them, somewhere in the clearing, a faint scrape of claws told them they were not as alone as they'd hoped—someone was watching. The night tightened like a held breath, and both knew the waiting had only just begun.

24.

Otterpaw yawned as the dewdrops began drying from the grass beneath her paws, separating the watermint from the tansy she had gathered. Thistleheart sat on the other side of the medicine den, placing the herbs she'd gathered into piles in their stock.

I wonder how he differentiates the herbs, since he can't see. Otterpaw thought as she separated her pile.

"You're moving slower than a mole!" Thistleheart snapped. "Sorry!" Otterpaw apologized, moving her paws faster to get them separated.

Once they were done, Thistleheart began to take out a few of the herbs from his stock. Otterpaw tilted her head. "What are you doing?" She asked, her amber eyes wide with curiosity. "You'll see." Thistleheart meowed, grabbing some poppyseeds from his stock.

Once he was done, five different herbs lay on the floor of the medicine den. "I think it's time you have an assessment." He meowed. Otterpaw had been training for two moons now—but she didn't think she'd have an assessment any time soon!

"What's this?" Thistleheart pointed to a herb with a thin stem and green leaves. *Easy!* Otterpaw thought. "Thyme." She answered confidently. Her mentor's blind eyes sparked with impressment.

"Very good. Now what is it used for?" He questioned her again. "It's used to help calm down a cat who's in shock or distress." She replied, confident again.

Thistleheart purred approvingly, his whiskers twitching. "Correct. You've been paying attention."

Otterpaw's chest swelled with pride. *Maybe I can really do this. Maybe I can be a medicine cat worthy of StarClan.*

Thistleheart flicked his tail toward another herb— flat, rounded

leaves with a faint, bitter scent. "And this one?" he asked.

Otterpaw leaned closer, sniffing. "Mouse bile?" she guessed hesitantly, wrinkling her nose.

Thistleheart let out a mrrow of amusement. "Close—but that's dock, not bile." He nudged it toward her paws. "Good for soothing scratches and sore pads. You'll want to remember that one. Every apprentice gets their paws torn up at least once."

"Even me?" she joked. "Especially you," he teased, flicking her ear gently with his tail.

Otterpaw purred softly, warmth blooming in her chest. Moments like this made her forget the pressure of being a medicine cat apprentice— the endless herbs, the responsibility, the connection to StarClan she wasn't sure she even had yet.

Thistleheart's voice pulled her back. "All right, two more. What's this one?" He nudged forward a golden clump of flowers. "Marigold," Otterpaw said without hesitation. "For infection."

"And this?" His paw rested on a stem with purple-blue flowers. Otterpaw hesitated, then meowed, "Borage. It helps nursing queens produce milk... and lowers fever."

A deep purr rumbled in Thistleheart's chest. "Excellent. You passed your first assessment, Otterpaw." Her eyes widened. "Really? That was it?"

"That was it," Thistleheart confirmed with a grin. "Next time, I'll test you on treatments—not just names. But for now, you've earned a rest."

Otterpaw's tail waved happily behind her. "Thank you, Thistleheart! I won't let you down." As she bounded to sort the herbs back into their piles, Thistleheart lifted his head, swelling with pride for his apprentice.

Cloudpaw, Otterpaw's littermate, bounded happily into the medicine den. "Otterpaw, Otterpaw! Guess what?" He practically bounced with excitement. "Woah, where's the battle?" Otterpaw

teased.

"Oh hush, you snarky furball!" Cloudpaw shoved her. "If you two are going to banter like kits, you can do it outside." Thistleheart grumbled, now back to his grumpy old self.

Cloudpaw rolled his eyes and led Otterpaw out into the clearing. "Alright, what's up?" She asked, her tone laced with suspicion. "I'm getting my final assessment in three sunrises!" He announced proudly. He'd been training for five moons now—and Otterpaw would've been training for five moons too if she hadn't began as a warrior apprentice.

"But you've only been training for five moons!" Otterpaw meowed, her eyes wide with surprise. "The warrior code says—"

"Badgerstar has already broken the warrior code. Kits in ShadowClan become apprentices at four moons, and only train for four moons." Cloudpaw looked away, his amber eyes now glittering with guilt. "And Beaverstar frets that Badgerstar is planning something, now that he's taken two RiverClan warriors, he feels that he needs more."

Badgerstar! Otterpaw's eyes were wide. *No wonder Mottledtail, Honeyshine, and Flamestep all looked so small. They should still be apprentices!*

Otterpaw's paws felt frozen to the ground. *They should still be apprentices...* Her mind raced as Cloudpaw's words echoed in her head. "Badgerstar's planning something," she whispered, barely realizing she'd said it out loud.

Cloudpaw's ears twitched. "Yeah. Beaverstar's been on edge since the last gathering. He says Badgerstar's forming alliances with rogues and loners—maybe even cats from other Clans."

Like Geckonose and Spottedface. Otterpaw's belly churned. She didn't know much about the two RiverClan cats—only that ShadowClan had taken them and refused to let them go.

"I have to tell Thistleheart," she blurted, already turning back

toward the medicine den.

Cloudpaw stepped in front of her, his tail puffing. "No! You can't. If Beaverstar's right, and Badgerstar's preparing for something big, he'll want to know if RiverClan—or WindClan—starts talking about it. You'll get caught up in it too."

Otterpaw froze mid-step. *He's right... but how can I just stay quiet? StarClan wouldn't want us to ignore something like this.*

"Cloudpaw..." She looked at her brother, fear flickering in her amber eyes. "If Badgerstar's really trying to take over the forest, no cat will be safe. Not even us."

Her brother's playful expression faded, replaced by something grim. "Then we'll have to be ready. Just... don't do anything mouse-brained, alright?"

Otterpaw nodded, though her tail tip twitched anxiously. *StarClan, guide me. Please let me know what to do.*

She slipped back into the medicine den, but her thoughts were far from herbs and poultices. As she settled beside Thistleheart, sorting marigold with shaking paws, one thought echoed in her mind like thunder through the tunnels beneath the forest.

If Badgerstar really means to start a war... I'll need to be ready too. Every cat from every Clan will...

25.

Skywhisper was resting outside of the medicine den with Juniperfur, who she'd began to trust more and more over the last half moon. Suddenly, the stench of ShadowClan hit her nose. Badgerstar strutted into the camp, as if he were apart of ThunderClan.

Fernshine from RiverClan padded by his side, while multiple warriors—including Branchstar from WindClan—followed behind him. Thrushstar stepped in front of them, bearing his fangs. "What are you doing here?" He demanded, flexing his claws. "I'm here to collect *my* warriors." Badgerstar replied calmly, unblinking at Thrushstar's hostility.

Warriors began to rise up. Spottedfall, Stormpelt, Flashwhisker, Tandgledfur, and Acornheart all joined Badgerstar's side immediately. Petalberry rose from the nursery, leaving her kits mewling after her as she left.

Badgerstar padded up to Juniperfur—the ex-rogue who he'd brought into the Clans to be on his side. "Hurry up, Juniper. It's time to go." He hissed.

Juniperfur stood up, unsheathing his claws. His blue eyes filled with venom. "It's Juniperfur now. And ThunderClan is my home." He spat back.

Badgerstar's expression darkened, his fur bristling just slightly. The air around him seemed to grow colder. "You think you can defy me, after everything I've done for you?" His voice was low, calm—but every word slithered with restrained fury.

Juniperfur didn't flinch. "You didn't do it for me," he growled. "You did it for yourself. You wanted another cat to use."

A growl rippled through the clearing as Badgerstar's warriors spread out behind him. Fernshine's tail lashed, and Branchstar's expression

was unreadable, though his claws dug into the dirt.

Skywhisper pushed herself to her paws, her heart pounding. *StarClan, help us...* She could feel the tension in the camp rising like a storm ready to break.

Thrushstar stepped forward, his fur puffed and teeth bared. "You've overstepped your boundaries for the last time, Badgerstar. Leave, before I—"

"You'll what?" Badgerstar interrupted smoothly, his dark eyes gleaming with amusement. "You think ThunderClan can stand against me? Against *us*?" He flicked his tail toward Fernshine and Branchstar, and though neither the RiverClan warrior nor WindClan's leader spoke, the sight alone made the gathered cats waver.

Skywhisper's claws dug into the ground. *He's bluffing. He has to be.* Juniperfur's tail lashed, his gaze locked on Badgerstar. "I'll never go back to BadgerClan. Not with a leader who breaks the code, steals cats, and acts like he's StarClan itself."

Gasps rippled through the camp. Badgerstar's fur spiked, his calm mask cracking at last. "You'll regret that," he hissed, stepping closer, his shadow stretching long across the clearing.

"Enough!" Thrushstar's yowl split the air. "You come into my camp, threaten my warriors, and expect us to just bow to you? ThunderClan stands *alone*—and we'll die that way before we ever serve a cat like you."

A murmur of agreement rippled through ThunderClan's ranks—Lionclaw, Acornheart, and even cranky old Ashtail pushing forward to stand beside their leader.

Skywhisper felt courage spark in her chest. She stepped up beside Juniperfur, meeting Badgerstar's venomous gaze. "You heard him. Get out."

For a long moment, silence ruled the clearing. Then, Badgerstar's tail twitched once. He turned away without another word, though

his gaze lingered on Skywhisper and Juniperfur—cold, calculating, promising retribution.

As the BadgerClan cats withdrew, the tension in the air didn't ease—it only shifted. Skywhisper glanced at Juniperfur, her heart still hammering.*This isn't over,* she thought. *Not by a long shot.*

A few warriors followed Badgerstar out, leaving only the loyal ThunderClan cats. Petalberry abandoned her kits—Bluekit and Wolfkit. They were both nearly six moons old by now, but Skywhisper could only imagine how it must've felt to watch your own mother betray your clan, to walk away from you.

Acornheart, their father, quickly moved to soothe his distressed kits. Bluekit and Wolfkit huddled together, muzzles buried in their father's brown fur.

Twigdance bounded over to Juniperfur, touching her nose to his. "I knew I could trust you, Juniperfur! I knew you wouldn't join them." Her green eyes shone with happiness. Juniperfur smiled, giving her shoulder a soothing lick. "Of course I won't." He meowed.

Skywhisper felt warmth bloom in her chest as she watched them. After everything that had just happened, seeing even the smallest flicker of hope meant something. *Maybe the Clans aren't as broken as he wants us to think,* she thought, her tail wrapping around her paws.

Thrushstar's voice broke through the soft murmurs in the clearing. "Let those cowards leave. The cats who remain are ThunderClan—true ThunderClan." His tone was steady, though sorrow hid beneath it. His gaze lingered on the nursery, where Acornheart still comforted his kits.

Juniperfur dipped his head to the leader. "Thank you for letting me stay," he said quietly. "I meant what I said. This is my home now."

Thrushstar nodded. "You've proven that today." He turned his head toward Skywhisper, his amber eyes softening. "You too, Skywhisper. You've shown loyalty that would make even StarClan proud."

Her ears flushed with embarrassment, and she looked away. "I only did what was right." Juniperfur brushed his tail lightly against her flank. "Sometimes that's the hardest thing to do."

Twigdance purred softly beside him, the tension finally easing from her shoulders. Around them, the Clan slowly began to pick up the pieces—rebuilding the sense of safety that had been ripped away the moment Badgerstar had stepped into camp.

Skywhisper glanced toward the camp entrance, where the last traces of his scent faded into the forest. *He won't stop here,* she thought grimly. *This was just the beginning. He will attack soon.*

Her gaze flicked to Juniperfur, who was now sharing tongues with Twigdance, his fur brushing hers as they murmured quietly to one another. Skywhisper's heart ached—not with jealousy, but with fear. *StarClan, please let them have this peace for a little while longer.*

26.

Brackenjaw leapt forward, catching a vole that had passed over from the ThunderClan border. It had been only a sunrise since Badgerstar took Branchstar, Antdrift, Brookfall, and several other warriors from the camp. A few ShadowClan warriors—who weren't apart of BadgerClan—took refugee with WindClan.

Still, they lacked warriors. Pollengleam was doing the best she could without Branchstar. She made a fine warrior and deputy, but she hadn't been ready for Branchstar to leave. She'd chosen Sunbreeze as a temporary deputy for her— although she technically wasn't leader without StarClan's blessing.

Alderkit, Gustkit, and Rosekit were all preparing for their apprentice ceremony as Brackenjaw dropped off his fresh-kill into the pile.

"I hope Brackenjaw is my mentor!" Alderkit burst out. "He's super strong!" The little black-and-white tom meowed excitedly. "He can't be that strong!" Rosekit argued, her fur puffing out. Meanwhile, Gustkit stayed quiet.

"He is that strong! He fought off four RiverClan warriors on his own!" Alderkit's eyes shone. *It's only because of my power.* Brackenjaw thought guiltily. It felt wrong that such young cats admired him, when he hadn't done anything to earn his strength.

Brackenjaw forced a purr as he passed the kits, trying to mask the unease tightening in his chest. "You three will make great apprentices soon," he said lightly, brushing his tail over Alderkit's ear. "And maybe one of you will end up stronger than me."

"Impossible!" Alderkit squeaked with a grin. Rosekit rolled her eyes, while Gustkit gave a shy smile before padding back toward the nursery.

Brackenjaw's amusement faded as he turned away, padding toward

the edge of camp. *If only they knew. Strength gifted by StarClan—or cursed by them.* His claws flexed against the ground. *I didn't earn it, and I don't even know how to control it half the time.*

"Brackenjaw." Pollengleam's voice pulled him from his thoughts. The golden she-cat padded up beside him, her green eyes clouded with exhaustion. "You've been working hard. Take a moment to rest. I can send another patrol to check the ThunderClan border."

"I don't mind," he replied. "Keeps me busy." Pollengleam gave a small, grateful nod, though worry flickered in her eyes. "Just... don't push yourself too hard. We can't afford to lose any more good warriors." Her voice dropped. "Especially not ones the Clan looks up to."

He dipped his head respectfully and watched as she padded off toward the high rock. *She's trying to be strong for everyone,* he thought, admiration softening his gaze. *StarClan help her—she didn't ask for any of this.*

The camp had changed since Badgerstar's attack. Fewer warriors filled the clearing. Patrols came and went with weary steps, and the once-lively hum of conversation had dimmed to whispers.

Brackenjaw's gaze drifted to the sky. *Branchstar, wherever you are... I hope you're fighting to come home. Because WindClan needs you. And so do I.*

But he knew better than to wish. Because Branchstar had left on his own. He agreed with what Badgerstar was doing.

"All cats fast enough to catch prey on the moor, gather beneath the Tallrock for a Clan meeting!" Pollengleam yowled, her eyes being the only thing to betray her nervousness. It was her first baking ceremony, after all.

She must be worried that she'll mess up. Brackenjaw thought sympathetically. She'd had no time to prepare to be the WindClan leader.

"Gustkit, Alderkit, and Rosekit, step forward." She looked down

upon the kits. Alderkit and Rosekit excitedly leapt forward, while Gustkit slowly moved forward and sat down, curling her tail over her forepaws.

"These kits have reached the age of six moons, meaning it is time for them to become apprentices." Pollengleam took a breath, just as nervous as the younger cats. "Brackenjaw, Foxblaze, and Horseflower. Step forward."

The three young warriors stepped up. As Brackenjaw stood next to the Tallrock, Alderkit bristled with excitement.

"Gustkit, from this moment until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Gustpaw. I've chosen Foxblaze to be your mentor. I wish that he will pass down his skills and confidence to you." Pollengleam nodded her head, and Foxblaze pressed his nose against Gustpaw's. She gave her new mentor's shoulder a lick.

"Rosekit, from this moment until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Rosepaw. Horseflower will be your mentor. I wish that she will pass down her spirit and forethought onto you." Pollengleam meowed. Horseflower's fur puffed out a bit at the temporary leader's praise, but she carried on with the ceremony—pressing her nose to Rosepaw's. The ginger she-cat licked her new mentor's shoulder, looking nervous but excited.

"And last but not least, Alderkit, from this moment until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Alderpaw. Brackenjaw will be your mentor. I wish that he will pass down his skills in battle and determination onto you." Before Pollengleam could even finish, Alderpaw had smashed his nose against Brackenjaw's, giving his shoulder a lick. The young tom was practically bursting with excitement.

Brackenjaw blinked in surprise at Alderpaw's energy, but a purr rumbled in his chest. *StarClan, he's like a leaf caught in a whirlwind,* he thought with quiet amusement. *I'll have my paws full with this one.*

Pollengleam's tail twitched as she watched the new apprentices with a trembling smile. The Clan let out a chorus of approving yowls, the sound echoing under the dusky sky. Yet even among the

cheers, worry twined through the air like creeping bramble—because the shadow of Badgerstar's betrayal still loomed over the moor.

Brackenjaw dipped his head to Pollengleam, offering her a reassuring glance. *She's trying so hard. I hope she knows we'll stand behind her—no matter what Branchstar and Badgerstar have planned.*

Alderpaw pressed against his side then, eyes glowing with pride. "Do you think I'll be a great warrior like you?" he whispered eagerly.

Brackenjaw stared down at his wide, hopeful eyes. "You won't be *like* me," he answered softly. "You'll be better. Now come—your training begins at dawn."

The young tom's tail lashed with excitement, and even Gustpaw looked up, some quiet spark of hope flickering in her eyes again.

And as the night bore down around them, the fragile feeling of unity among WindClan held—however briefly—against the coming storm.

27.

The camp was practically bursting with all the cats Badgerstar had brought into camp. Amberface, Rainsight, Frostflower, Berryfang, Redfang, and Dawntuft had all left to go stay with WindClan. The look of betrayal his sister had given him still haunted Whiteflame.

"BadgerClan!" Badgerstar yowled from on the Shaderock. Branchstar sat on top of it as well, and Fernshine sat next to the rock as the deputy. "Branchstar has an announcement."

Branchstar stepped forwards, his blue eyes glittering confidently. "Thank you, Badgerstar. But I don't deserve to be called Branchstar anymore. I am not the WindClan leader any longer. I am giving up StarClan's blessing. Call me Branch*leg* again. I am a *warrior* of BadgerClan."

No! Whiteflame had to hold back the wail of a lost kit. *He can't give up his blessing!* Whiteflame knew that it wouldn't be the first time a leader had given up their nine lives and name. But this time it was for BadgerClan. For Badgerstar.

A stunned silence fell over the clearing—broken only by the soft rustle of pelts as cats shifted uncomfortably. Even some of Badgerstar's most loyal followers looked uncertain.

He can't mean that, Whiteflame thought, claws sinking into the earth. *He's giving up everything StarClan gave him—for a cat with only one life.*

Badgerstar's tail brushed Branchleg's shoulder approvingly, his yellow eyes gleaming with triumph. "A wise choice," he purred, his voice smooth as crowfood grease. "StarClan is weak. You've chosen strength instead."

A murmur of agreement rippled through the crowd—hesitant, fearful. Spottedfall dipped her head, while Stormpelt and Flashwhisker yowled in support. Geckonose pressed closer to

Whiteflame, her fur bristling. "He's turning them all into mindless badgers," she hissed under her breath.

Whiteflame forced himself to stay still, though fury flared in his chest. *He's not just taking cats anymore. He's taking their faith.*

Fernshine raised her muzzle proudly beside the rock. "Let all cats know," she called, "that from this day forward, BadgerClan stands alone. We need no StarClan, no borders, and no rivals. We will rule the forest by strength and loyalty!"

A roar erupted from the gathered cats, though it was more of fear than pride. Whiteflame's heart sank. *They cheer for him because they're scared. Because they think he can't be stopped.*

But deep down, beneath the weight of despair and betrayal, a single thought burned brighter than the rest. *He's wrong. He can be stopped. And I'll prove it.*

Sunnypool was working in his den, tripping over Stormkit every now and again. "I wanna be a medicine cat, just like you, Sunnypool!" She meowed happily. Whiteflame felt a pang of guilt. *She can't be a medicine cat. Badgerstar would never let her.* Then the guilt was replaced by anger. *He'd kill her. Just like he did to Molepaw.*

Geckonose padded towards the fresh-kill pile, carrying a sparrow and a vole in her jaws. "Nice catches." He meowed, running his tail along his mates spine.

Marshkit, Larkkit, Graykit, and Sparrowkit tumbled out of the nursery. Beeflight followed, chuckling as Larkkit tripped over her own paws. "Beeflight should've named you Clumsykit!" Graykit teased. "Or Tumblekit." Sparrowkit chimed in, purring with amusement.

Meanwhile, Marshkit simply headed to the fresh-kill pile. She grabbed a small mouse in her mouth, biting into it. She gave a purr of delight.

Larkkit clumsily bounded forwards as well, followed by Sparrowkit and Graykit. Larkkit and Graykit shared a plump vole, while

Sparrowkit ate a small starling.

"Is it their first time eating fresh-kill?" Geckonose asked Beeflight, who nodded, her gaze full of a motherly love. "Yes. Saturn's kits had their first time yesterday, so I figured these four were ready too." She licked Marshkit on the head. The tiny she-kit licked her mother on the muzzle as well.

Badgerstar padded over to them, gazing at the kits as well. "Beeflight, I've already spoken to Saturn. If your kits can eat fresh-kill, they can catch it, too. Tomorrow they become apprentices." He meowed gruffly. Beeflight's tail wrapped around her kits protectively.

But before she could say anything— "No!" Mudstrike stepped to his mate's side. "I won't let you put another litter of ours into danger! They're only three moons old!"

"But we want to become apprentices!" Larkkit protested. "And they should be." Badgerstar bared his fangs and unsheathed his claws. "We can't afford any other mouths to feed if they aren't catching prey!" He spat.

Sunnypool froze, herbs still clinging to his fur. The bracken bundle he'd been sorting fell from his paws as he stared at Badgerstar in shock. Stormkit, who had been pouncing at his tail seconds before, shrank back with a frightened squeak.

Whiteflame's hackles rose, his claws digging furrows into the ground. *Three moons old. They're barely out of the nursery—this is madness.* He stepped forward, ready to speak, but Badgerstar's glare snapped to him before he could open his mouth.

"This is not up for debate." Badgerstar's voice was like stone grinding on stone. "Any kit old enough to chew meat is old enough to hunt it. If they're too weak, then they have no place in this Clan." His cold gaze flicked over the four trembling kits, lingering on Marshkit's tiny frame. "Survival isn't a kit's game anymore. It's a war."

Mudstrike stood his ground, pressing against Beeflight, who

trembled despite the anger in her eyes. "I won't let you do this," he growled. "They're *kits*. Our kits. They're not ready!"

Badgerstar let out a slow breath, as though trying to contain his fury. "Then maybe you should have raised them stronger. We don't have room for weakness, Mudstrike. Not anymore. Not ever again."

Whiteflame's heart thundered. Stormkit, from inside Sunnypool's den, let out a frightened little squeak. Geckonose moved closer to Whiteflame, her fur brushing his, silent but standing with him.

Sunnypool finally spoke, voice shaking like leaves in a storm. "If you force these kits out before they're ready, you'll kill them. Let them stay, at least until they can survive on their own."

Badgerstar rounded on him, eyes blazing. "You forget your place, medicine cat. Kits are a resource. Not a burden. If they want to stay, they'll prove their worth. Or they won't." Silence fell—cold and suffocating.

Then Sparrowkit—tiny, brave Sparrowkit—stepped forward. Her mouse's tail still hung from her mouth as she looked up at Badgerstar with startling determination.

"I can catch prey," he mewed firmly. "If it'll help the Clan... I'll try."

Marshkit faltered for a moment, then stepped beside her. Graykit, trembling but resolute, followed next. Even Larkkit, clumsy but earnest, stumbled forward to stand with them.

Badgerstar smiled—dark and satisfied. "Good," he growled. "Then tomorrow, you become apprentices."

Whiteflame closed his eyes. *This isn't a Clan anymore. It's a cage. One we have to break.*

28.

Marshpaw, Graypaw, Larkpaw, Sparrowpaw, Starlingpaw, Stormpaw, and Thornpaw had all become apprentices. Geckonose was the mentor to Larkpaw, and Whiteflame to Sparrowpaw. The young tom was a quick learner, and already a decent hunter. Meanwhile, Geckonose had her paws full with Larkpaw.

The two brought their apprentices out to train together. "Today, you'll be practicing team hunting." Geckonose meowed, glancing at Larkpaw. *I hope she doesn't scare the prey away. She's louder than a badger!*

Geckonose sighed. *She's still a kit.* She reminded herself. "We'll demonstrate." Whiteflame meowed, nudging Geckonose.

He signaled Geckonose to his side, and the two slipped into a practiced hunter's crouch. Sparrowpaw's eyes gleamed as he watched, while Larkpaw leaned forward so far she almost toppled over.

"You circle left," Whiteflame whispered. "I'll flush it toward you. Match your breathing to the wind. Stay silent."

Geckonose slid away into the shadows, her pelt blending seamlessly with the dappled earth. Whiteflame shifted, eyes sharp, waiting.

Only moments later, a fat mouse scurried out of a patch of moss. With silent precision, Whiteflame darted forward—and the mouse bolted straight into Geckonose's waiting paws.

"Nice catch," Sparrowpaw murmured in awe, tail flicking. "I wanna do that!" Larkpaw blurted, bouncing on her paws.

"You will," Geckonose said with a soft purr. "But quiet paws first, okay? Think like shadow. No sound."

Larkpaw nodded with determined seriousness, crouching comically

low, belly fur brushing the pine needles. Sparrowpaw, meanwhile, had already scented a squirrel. His crouch was nearly perfect—silent, steady, tail just low enough.

Whiteflame watched, pride flickering in his gaze as his apprentice crept closer... and closer. *He's a natural.*

Just as Sparrowpaw started his leap— *CRACK*! A branch snapped behind them. Larkpaw, caught in her own tail, went tumbling, scattering pine cones and startling the squirrel up a tree.

"I was *so close!*" she moaned, scrambling upright, needles stuck in her whiskers. "Close to catching yourself maybe," Sparrowpaw teased, though gently.

Geckonose just shook her head, but her eyes softened. "We'll try again. Even in a broken Clan..."

Her gaze drifted toward the direction of camp, where Badgerstar's shadow loomed large over everything. "...There's still room for learning. And for hope."

"Now get those needles out of your whiskers!" Whiteflame meowed, nudging the young she-cat. "You two have still got to catch something." *Or else Badgerstar won't let them eat tonight.*

Larkpaw and Sparrowpaw tried again, this time on a mouse. Larkpaw got much closer this time, but her tail brushed against leaves on the ground. The mouse began to dart away, but Sparrowpaw jumped in front of it. It dashed back away, towards Larkpaw. "Hurry! Catch it!" Sparrowpaw called. Larkpaw leapt forward and caught the mouse between her jaws, skidding against the ground.

"You caught it!" Geckonose couldn't help but burst out with joy, pressing her muzzle to Larkpaw's forehead. The apprentice puffed her chest fur out proudly. "You did great!" Whiteflame praised Sparrowpaw as well.

Geckonose and Whiteflame took their apprentices and fresh-kill back to camp, their flanks brushing against each other.

Marshpaw and Thornpaw were tussling playfully near the edge of camp, their tiny paws stirring up dust as they rolled. Stormpaw sat beside the medicine den, her tail wrapped neatly around her paws as she spoke softly with Sunnypool. He was sorting herbs nearby, occasionally pausing to sniff or feel the leaves laid out before him.

"You're learning well," Sunnypool meowed approvingly after Stormpaw recited the uses of marigold. "Badgerstar's decision may have rushed your training, but I won't let you face your future unprepared."

Stormpaw dipped her head respectfully, though a flicker of uncertainty darkened her blue eyes. Being the daughter of Saturn and Badgerstar was a heavy burden—and it showed every time the leader's gaze lingered on her a moment too long.

Fernshine, Stormpaw's mentor, watched with narrowed eyes. *I'm glad my apprentice at least* wants *to be a warrior.* Geckonose thought bitterly.

Geckonose and Whiteflame entered camp with Sparrowpaw and Larkpaw close behind, fresh-kill dangling triumphantly from the apprentices' jaws. Badgerstar's yellow eyes slid toward them from atop the Shaderock, cold and calculating.

"Good," he said at last, eyeing Larkpaw's mouse and Sparrowpaw's squirrel. "At least two of the new apprentices will not weigh down the Clan."

Larkpaw's ears flattened, and Whiteflame had to hold back a growl. Badgerstar didn't even acknowledge the mentors before leaping down and stalking toward the fresh-kill pile.

Sparrowpaw looked up at Whiteflame, his voice small. "Did... did we do good?" He asked hopefully. "You both did great," Whiteflame assured him, brushing the young tom's ear with his tail. "And I'm proud of you," Geckonose added softly to Larkpaw, touching her forehead with her nose.

Geckonose's touch seemed to soothe Larkpaw... at least for a moment. But then Fernshine padded up, her sleek gray fur smooth

and eyes sharp as frost.

"Stormpaw wouldn't dare let a mouse escape so easily," she remarked coolly, her tail flicking dismissively at Larkpaw's catch. "Some cats just aren't cut out for battle or the hunt."

Larkpaw flinched as if struck. Sparrowpaw bristled beside her, but a gentle brush of Whiteflame's tail kept him from speaking out.

"Careful, Fernshine," Geckonose warned, her tone low but steady. "Larkpaw tried harder today than ever, and every cat learns at their own pace. And some cats aren't learning what they should be." Her green eyes narrowed, casting a glance to Stormpaw— who was helping Sunnypool in the medicine den. "That's what being a mentor means."

But Fernshine only smirked. "Maybe your standards are lower than mine. Stormpaw will be a force greater than any of these kits." She boasted. "Who knows? Maybe Stormpaw will never be a warrior. Maybe she wants to be a medicine cat." Whiteflame chimed in, his blue eyes narrow.

"She *will* be a warrior." Fernshine growled, her voice full of a low venom. "She'll be *more* than a warrior. She'll be stronger than any cat in this forest."

She sauntered away toward the warriors' den, tail flicking like a proud viper. Stormpaw padded dutifully after her—though she cast a troubled glance back at Larkpaw, who stared at the ground, jaw trembling.

Whiteflame pressed his shoulder against Geckonose's. "Badgerstar's poisoned her head. But she's not heartless," he murmured, gaze fixed on Stormpaw. "At least... not yet."

Geckonose let out a breath, watching Larkpaw gather herself. *She doesn't deserve this pressure.* Her heart hurt for all of them—kits forced to grow too fast, warriors twisted by loyalty to the wrong cat.

"Sparrowpaw," she said at last, nodding toward the apprentices' den.

"Take Larkpaw to get something to eat. We can train more tomorrow."

Sparrowpaw nudged his sister gently, and together, they disappeared into camp. Geckonose and Whiteflame stood in silence for a moment, the fading light casting long shadows across the clearing.

"This can't last forever," Geckonose murmured under her breath. Whiteflame's eyes went cold as the stars above. "It won't."

29.

Skywhisper was half-asleep when the scent of RiverClan hit her nose. She shot up, running out of the medicine den. She was met with Cheetahleg, who was panting for breath. "Skywhisper! WindClan is being attacked by Badgerstar! Even with WindClan to help, we're outnumbered!" She gasped.

Thrushstar came out of his den, leaping onto the Highledge. "Cats of ThunderClan!" He yowled, waking up every cat in the camp. "WindClan is under attack by BadgerClan. We must help."

Murmurs and hisses rippled through the clearing—shock, anger, a flicker of fear. Lionclaw stood rigid just below Thrushstar, eyes narrowed, tail lashing.

"We've fought beside WindClan before, and we will again," Thrushstar continued, his gaze sweeping the Clan. "Gather at the hollow entrance in two patrols. Lionclaw, you lead the first. I'll take the second. Brightwing, prepare what you can. We'll bring back wounded."

Beetleflight and Twigdance were already shoulder-to-shoulder, eyes blazing at the news. Bluepaw and Wolfpaw exchanged wide-eyed glances, their tails quivering. *Their mother isn't one of us anymore,* Skywhisper remembered with a pang as she stared across camp. But some ThunderClan hearts never truly turn.

Flashwhisker, Tangledfur, Spottedfall, Petalberry—even those loyal to Badgerstar had once fought by ThunderClan's side. She forced the ache away. *This battle isn't against old Clanmates. It's for what they betrayed.*

Spottedfall's old nest was still empty beside Tangledfur's. Skywhisper hoped she wouldn't have to tend their wounds today.

"We should help Thornwhisker and Morningfur out in the WindClan medicine den." Brightwing suggested to Skywhisper. She nodded

and the two caught up with the leaving patrol— each carrying as many herbs as they could in their jaws.

Once they got to the medicine den, Thistleheart and Otterpaw were already there. They'd brought herbs from RiverClan too. The den was full, injured cats coming in and out from every Clan. Some who were too injured to keep fighting had to be taken into the elder's den to rest, since there just wasn't enough room in the medicine den.

Suddenly, a dark gray tom with black flecks stumbled into the den. His left arm was limp, and he was bleeding from multiple large gashes on his side. He flopped onto the floor.

"Charcoalbark!" Brightwing cried out. *The father of her kits.* Skywhisper remembered with a glance at the pale ginger she-cat's belly. It was certainly larger, but not swollen enough to attract any suspicion. *Yet.*

"He's dying..." Morningfur muttered, her green eyes full of sorrow for her Clanmate. "There's nothing we can do now." Thornwhisker meowed gruffly, sounding less emotional, but the sadness in his amber eyes betrayed him.

Brightwing cast Skywhisper a desperate glance. She nodded and stepped forward, nudging herself in between Morningfur and Thistleheart. She put her paws on Charcoalbark's side, the tom's breathing shallow. She took a breath, concentrating on her powers. The wounds slowly began to stop bleeding, closing up. His breathing began to return to normal.

Otterpaw watched with wide eyes. Brightwing pressed her muzzle against her former apprentice's flank as a silent *thank you.*

Skywhisper lowered her paws and backed away, taking a slow breath as Charcoalbark stirred. His flank rose and fell in steadier rhythm, and his dull eyes fluttered open.

"Skywhisper..." he rasped, attempting to shift, but Brightwing steadied him gently with her tail. *Thank StarClan,* she thought—not a prayer this time, but a genuine sigh of relief. Her heart hadn't

stopped pounding since she saw him stumble in, broken and bleeding.

"You're safe," Brightwing whispered to him, her voice tight with both exhaustion and emotion. "Stay still. You've lost a lot of blood."

Charcoalbark blinked slowly, clearly confused, but said nothing. There would be time to explain later—if there was a later.

Skywhisper turned her head to check on the rest of the den. Thornwhisker and Morningfur were already shifting their focus to a WindClan warrior whose flank was shredded. Thistleheart murmured quiet, rushed orders to Otterpaw, who was fumbling through the herb stores, but doing well for her age. She met Skywhisper's gaze again, awe still dancing in her eyes.

Skywhisper dipped her head in acknowledgement but didn't pause. *There are more. There are always more.*

Lionclaw and a RiverClan tom stumbled in next, supporting a ThunderClan she-cat between them. Her head lolled, and blood soaked her belly fur. Tangledfur.

Skywhisper's paws chilled. Her claws slid from their sheaths as she fought the instinct to flinch at the name. They had fought side by side as ThunderClan cats. But now—

"Please!" Lionclaw begged, voice cracking. "She may be BadgerClan, but she saved Beetleflight's life—she deserves a chance."

Skywhisper hesitated only a heartbeat before leaping into action, motioning her tail to an open space near a pile of moss. "Lay her there. Brightwing, help me with cobwebs and dock leaves."

As she worked, she felt Brightwing's tail brush her side in quiet gratitude—not just for Charcoalbark, but for refusing to abandon any cat in need. Even ones who had chosen Badgerstar's twisted path.

Across the den, Morningfur and Thornwhisker were already shoulder-to-shoulder again, their old rivalry melting under the shared strain of battle and blood.

We're all in this together, now, Skywhisper thought, eyes burning. *Not just for our Clans. For what's left of the code.*

30.

Brackenjaw was faced with three warriors— Poppystep, Stungface, and Weaseltuft. He felt a pang of guilt as he lunged at his former Clanmate. Weaseltuft writhed helplessly as he was pinned by Brackenjaw, who dug his claws into the brown tom's shoulders.

Stungface pounced on him, but he easily kicked the former ShadowClan warrior off with his hind legs. Brackenjaw raked his claws along Weaseltuft's side, causing him to yowl in pain. Poppystep lunged at Brackenjaw, knocking him off of Weaseltuft.

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Brackenjaw hit the ground hard, the wind forced from his lungs as Poppystep's claws scraped across his shoulder. The ginger she-cat's eyes were blazing, her breath feverish with adrenaline and desperation.

"Why are you doing this?!" she spat, launching herself again. Brackenjaw rolled aside just in time, her claws slicing a shallow cut across his flank instead of his throat.

"Because *you're* the one who turned your back on us!" Brackenjaw snarled as he sprang to his paws. He rammed into Poppystep's side, bowling her over with a single powerful swipe. She skidded through the dirt, claws tearing up the earth as she struggled to regain her footing.

Stungface was already charging at him again, fury twisting his features. "We didn't choose this!" he roared, leaping for Brackenjaw's neck.

Brackenjaw met him midair, both toms crashing to the ground in a whirl of claws and teeth. The world around him was nothing but blood, fur, and survival—the terrible churn of war.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a flash of brown fur—

Weaseltuft had dragged himself back up, trembling but determined. He staggered towards Brackenjaw with a snarl. "Traitor!"

Brackenjaw didn't falter. He kicked Stungface off and shoved the gasping tom aside long enough to face Weaseltuft head-on. Their eyes locked for a heartbeat—two warriors once bound by the same oath, now split by ideology and a leader's manipulation.

"It didn't have to be this way, Weaseltuft," Brackenjaw growled. Weaseltuft's gaze flickered, just once. But then he lunged, jaws wide. With a surge of grief and strength, Brackenjaw met him, pinning him under paw once more. His claws hovered, trembling. *StarClan, forgive me.*

But before he could make the killing blow, a shriek ripped through the clearing.

"Enough!" Every cat froze—even the wind paused. Whiteflame stood at the edge of the clearing, his fur bristling and fluffed out to twice its size, Skywhisper and Geckonose flanking him.

"This ends now. Stand down—*all of you.*" Whiteflame's harsh meow caused the neck fur of nearly every cat to bristle. The battlefield fell silent, heavy with the cost of every torn bond.

Badgerstar faced his son, his lip curled back to show blood-stained teeth— yet he was left unscathed. "Traitor!" He spat, "You deserve nothing but death!"

Then, Badgerstar lunged onto Whiteflame. The two toms tussled, biting and scratching at each other. Badgerstar clawed at Whiteflame's throat, but only managed to tear a bit of fur off. Whiteflame raised a powerful forepaw, hesitating only a moment. "Goodbye, Badger*hiss*." He spat before his claws ripped into Badgerhiss's chest. The brown tabby took one last gasp for air before he stopped breathing.

Badgerhiss's body lay limp and still, the forest around him frozen in the echo of his final breath.

Whiteflame didn't feel regret. Didn't feel sorrow. Just a cold, steady

certainty in his veins. *I was born to end him.* The prophecy had never lied—*his life for the Clans.*

He lifted his head and raised his voice so every cat could hear. "Badgerhiss is dead."

Gasps and murmurs rippled through the cats gathered—WindClan, ThunderClan, ShadowClan, even a few RiverClan warriors, all pausing to take in the truth of it.

A calm, strong voice answered from the gathered ranks. "Then it's time ShadowClan had its leader back."

Redfang stepped forward—broad-shouldered, amber-eyed, confident in a way that didn't need to roar to be heard. He'd been ShadowClan's deputy once—*Badgerhiss had shattered that.* But Redfang had not bowed.

"We've lost enough," Redfang said, gaze firm. "Friends. Kin. Honor." He glanced pointedly at Badgerhiss's form. "But now—we reclaim it."

He turned, facing the warriors of every Clan who bore fealty to unity in this moment. Then he raised his head.

"With ShadowClan's faith and StarClan's gaze upon me—I will lead us forward. Not through fear. Not through forced loyalty... but through strength. And justice."

"Redstar!" a voice cried from the crowd. And it rose again, stronger —"Redstar! Redstar!"

As the chant thrummed and swelled, Whiteflame slowly backed away from its center. He felt Sparrowpaw press against his side, trembling with a mix of awe and disbelief.

"You did it," the young tom whispered, eyes wide. Whiteflame rested his tail gently on Sparrowpaw's shoulder. "*We* did," he corrected again, his voice low but sure.

Because now—with Redfang standing strong at Badgerhiss's—there was finally a future worth fighting for.

"Whiteflame!" Geckonose pushed her way through the crowd. Whiteflame felt a pang of sadness. She wouldn't be in ShadowClan anymore. "I guess this is goodbye?" He asked, blue eyes welling with emotion. Geckonose shook her head. "No. I want to stay in ShadowClan." She announced.

A gasp came from Beaverstar. "I thank RiverClan for raising me, even though I'm half-ThunderClan. But my heart is with Whiteflame, and as long as he is in ShadowClan, that is where I will be." She cast a glance towards Redfang. "That is, if I'm welcome?"

Redfang's amber gaze softened, though his broad shoulders remained steady with the weight of his new role. He dipped his head respectfully toward Geckonose.

"You are welcome in ShadowClan, Geckonose. Any cat brave enough to make their own choice—especially in times like these—should be honored for it. You have proven your loyalty, not to birth or borders, but to who and what you believe in." His voice carried both strength and sincerity, echoing through the quiet clearing.

Whiteflame's breath caught. Relief—warm and unfamiliar—washed through him like sunlight after a bitter frost. He turned to Geckonose, eyes bright.

"You're staying," he whispered, unable to hold back a purr. His tail brushed hers. "I thought I'd lost you to RiverClan forever."

Geckonose nudged him gently with her muzzle. "You never lost me. Even when I was across the border, you were with me. And now..." she looked up at the sky, tinged with the faintest glimmer of starlight, "...I'll be here. By your side."

Sandstripe stepped forwards, pressing his nose to his daughter's. "I support your decision, Geckonose. You will be missed by RiverClan. By me." He muttered.

Sparrowpaw watched them from a few paces away, his tail flicking thoughtfully. He nudged Larkpaw. "Guess you get to keep your mentor," he teased, but his eyes shone with admiration.

Skywhisper, busy sorting herbs for the wounded, glanced up—and smiled. It wasn't the kind of smile she'd shared many times throughout this war. It was true. Tender. Hopeful.

And as the forest breathed again, calm settling in the wake of battle, Redfang stepped to the front of the gathered cats. "We rebuild," he meowed. "Together."

And from that moment on, a new chapter began—one where alliances were forged not by fear or force, but by choice, trust, and the strength of their shared destiny.